After Dinner Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Magazine

Stories By:

Bethany Bruno
Todd Sullivan
Cory Swanson
C.S. Griffel
Jacqueline Parker
Richard A. Shury
Geoffrey Hart

January 2023

VISIT…

After Dinner Conversation *Magazine* – January 2023

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The magazine is published monthly in print and electronic format.

All rights reserved. After Dinner Conversation Magazine is published by After Dinner Conversation, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in the United States of America. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from the publisher. Abstracts and brief quotations may be used without permission for citations, critical articles, or reviews. Contact the publisher at **info@afterdinnerconversation.com**.

ISSN# 2693-8359 Vol. 4, No. 1

.

Copyright © 2023 After Dinner Conversation
Editor in Chief: *Kolby Granville*
Story Editor: *R.K.H. Ndong*
Acquisitions Editor: *Stephen Repsys*
Design, layout, and discussion questions by After Dinner Conversation.

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com

After Dinner Conversation *believes humanity is improved by ethics and morals grounded in philosophical truth and that philosophical truth is discovered through intentional reflection and respectful debate. In order to facilitate that process, we have created a growing series of short stories across genres, a monthly magazine, and two podcasts. These accessible examples of abstract ethical and philosophical ideas are intended to draw out deeper discussions with friends, family, and students.*

Table Of Contents

FROM THE EDITOR ..... **- 4 -**

PULLING UP AZALEAS ..... **- 5 -**

ONE HOUR ..... **- 27 -**

THE CHAIR OF OPPORTUNITY ..... **- 43 -**

THE WORST THING YOU CAN DO IS NOTHING ..... **- 55 -**

PEOPLE LIKE ANTS ..... **- 67 -**

THE FORMULA ..... **- 83 -**

EXTERNALITIES ..... **- 93 -**

AUTHOR INFORMATION ..... **- 109 -**

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ..... **- 111 -**

* * *

From the Editor

Right now, people are bravely protesting in Iran about women being required to wear a hijab. This seems like the perfect opportunity to discuss *universal truths* versus *popular culture news*.

A story about women refusing to wear a hijab is certainly news. But next week, there will be another news story that is different, yet the same. And another, and another, forever. It is "crisis as pop culture." However, the *universal truth* it encapsulates is *very* important.

Wearing a head scarf costs you nothing. You are being asked to perform a simple, low-effort cultural symbol. And yet, people are rightfully willing to protest and die for a woman's right to refuse this requirement. Why?

You simply need to extend the idea of "required low-effort symbols" to even more extreme examples and the answer *(and story)* writes itself. Why kill *(or die)* in defense of the proverbial peppercorn? *That* is the universal truth worthy of serious discussion. *That* is what we try to publish, and, after three years as a digital magazine, *that* is a worthy "From the Editor" topic for our first official print issue.

Kolby Granville – Editor

Pulling Up Azaleas

Bethany Bruno

* * *

Throughout their lives, women are showered with bouquets of roses on numerous splendid occasions. But men? They're *only* given flowers at their funeral. It's a harsh world for men, as our lives tend to go unappreciated until death. Such was the case as I stood on my front lawn late one night with the end of a shotgun aimed at my chest. Two small azalea plants were grasped in my hands, one in each fist, as I raised my arms in surrender. I pleaded with the man to not do anything "hasty." My hands trembled as the exposed roots of each plant shook back and forth. Excess dirt first dropped in small thuds upon my shoulders, then sloped down to the wilted grass. I was having an adverse reaction to the adrenaline that was being rapidly pumped through my veins. I felt like I had been jabbed with an IV of scalding hot coffee. My embittered anger toward my wife subsided, briefly. A rage that had scaffolded each day since our wedding. She watched the scene unfold, straight-

faced from our second-story bedroom window. My little boy gripped tightly to her hip as he sobbed for his father's safety. The family I'd created was free-falling into an endless pit of darkness. That's the thing about dying, though. Fear easily replaces hate when death has arrived at your front doorstep.

Marriages are all about compromise, or so I was told. My first marriage wilted away slowly, like an ignored houseplant in desperate need of water. There's only so much disregard any man can take before realizing he deserves better. With Marla, our marriage was over after she turned her back on me. I wouldn't accept her rejection or excuses anymore. It was right after having sex, which should be a routine physical act between a husband and wife, but not for us. No, sex with her was as rare as finding a dollar bill on the sidewalk. It happened occasionally, but I would do all the work. As usual, she lay there like a heavy bag of rocks and didn't make a single peep of pleasure. When we were first married, it was comparable to pulling a rusty nail from an old oak tree with only a metal fork. It was a long-drawn-out game of *will she or won't she tonight?*

After I finished, she lay there on her back while staring up at the popcorn ceiling. She sniffled as she rubbed her crocodile tears away with the back of her hands. Then, for the last time in our marriage, she turned onto her right side. She faced the barren wall and away from my pleading eyes. She was as delicate as a dandelion when we married, yet somehow dodged gusts of wind in life. But after less than two years of marriage, she was unbearably broken as all her seeds parachuted far away.

"Now what's wrong with you?" I said.

Marla, stiff as a corpse in rigor mortis, let out a hushed, drawn-out sigh. Anger arose from within my bubbling core. It spread throughout my body, like the flames of an unruly campfire engulfing a withered forest. I extended my hand toward her gaunt back, grabbed a bony shoulder, and yanked so she would face me. Her glassy eyes were hollow, lacking any remnants of a once lively soul.

"Answer me," I said, "What's your problem?"

Marla quickly stood up and grabbed her wrinkled gray robe off the edge of the bed. She stepped onto the circular maroon rug, which scratched my bare feet. She bought it impulsively at a yard sale, along with other useless junk. After that wasteful shopping spree, I forbade her from using the checkbook without my permission first. Our entire livelihood was dependent on my income, and she certainly wasn't paying any electric bills as a homemaker. I sat up in bed, threw off the semi-white duvet, and began getting dressed in a huff. Rejected for the last time, I let her have it.

"It's always about you, isn't it? What about me? Don't you care about my feelings?" I said.

She stood there, with her back still toward me. She shook her head no, then yes, as she crossed her arms across her chest.

"This isn't the marriage I signed up for," I said.

I should've felt bad about the words that hastily fled from my mouth. I was exhausted by her constant over-dramatic gestures. I stood up and walked to my dresser, pulled out some underwear and mismatched socks, and threw them on top of the bed. I was so filled with rage that I slammed open the closet door and grabbed a large pile of clothes, hangers still attached,

and threw the load into my father's beat-up suitcase. It's the only thing left that proves his existence since he mysteriously disappeared from my life when I was just a boy. Still unmoving, Marla stood there like a child being scolded, obviously trying to make me feel bad. But I didn't. I remained silent as I grabbed my disordered suitcase, flattened pillow, and one pair of sneakers before I walked toward the bedroom door. As I was about to walk out of that room for the final time, I caught her eyes briefly. Not one word was uttered. She could've begged me to stay or to get the hell out. Her silence spoke loud and clear. She felt no obligation to keep me in her life. I stepped over the threshold as those cold eyes flew back down to the ugly carpet once more.

I walked past my son's room, hearing the familiar sound of his space mobile twirling around softly. Henry, just under a year old, was sound asleep and completely oblivious to the ruckus his mom caused. I stood there in the doorway and watched as his tiny chest arose, then fell, gradually in perfect unison. I'd often watched him sleep, ever since the day he was born. The slow ebb and flow of his gentle breathing brought me peace, like a tiny metronome entrancing me. I thought about scooping him up and taking him with me. He was another innocent victim in this situation, but I didn't want to abruptly awaken him because of his selfish mother's actions. I closed his door gently, then crept down the stairs toward the foyer. I grabbed my car keys off the counter before coming to a halt. I wanted to wait ten seconds. To give her ten chances at redemption. So, I could look back at this moment and say that she was given an opportunity to do the right thing before

ruining our lives forever with divorce. To provide a sliver of a safety net before I swam out further from this life for good. The ticking of the wooden cuckoo clock above the fireplace mantle counted faintly, *10,9,8,* as I waited for the creaking of a floorboard… *7,6,5,* for her to realize the error of her ways before trudging down the stairs to beg me to stay… *4,3,2,* to appreciate the life *I* built for us. The final tick of the *1* struck my ear, piercing a thin veil of reconciliation. Through her stubbornness, our crumbling marriage officially took its final breath. As I hauled my stuff into the car, I saw Gus.

He was a crotchety old man who never knew when to mind his own business. Just like when he peered out of his partially open kitchen window to watch me. Inhaling a long drag of a Marlboro, before blowing the smoke out the window and into the chilly night air. I nodded in his direction as part of my attempt at daily communication between neighbors. He didn't return a nod, as usual, as he flicked his still-lit cigarette onto the edge of my driveway. I stomped on the small flare of ash before kicking the remnants back onto his lawn. I took a final look at my dented garage door before putting the car into reverse. It was a large circular dimple that would never flatten, though I took my hammer to it numerous times.

A few hours later, I was awoken by a *beep-beep* from a nearby car. I instinctively cupped my stiff neck, an irritating prize won from sleeping upright against the steering wheel. I was in a rugged parking lot, encompassed by nauseating mustard-yellow with blood-red signage. It was the local *Shoprite* Plaza. My options were limited after being involuntarily put out of my house during the middle of the night. I should've called

Jackie, but I didn't want to worry her with a 2 a.m. phone call. So, I drove around Cherry Hill in search of a safe place before pulling over and parking for what was left of the night. Jackie was everything Marla felt insecure about. For one thing, Jackie was a natural nurturer. If I called her, she would have welcomed me with open arms and a tight hug to soothe my tired soul. Yet, the woman I was married to would barely speak to me.

I reached for the scruffy pocket watch inside the glovebox. That lump of metal was a gift from Marla's father, which he passed down to me on the day of the nuptials. Our wedding day became an annoying reminder of naïve settling. I knew, deep down, that marrying her would be a mistake. But in those days, young couples were expected to be married after high school. When I proposed, at twenty-three years old, I was last place in the relay race of adulthood. I thought Mar would grow into her role as a doting wife and eventually as a mother to my children. I never expected the kind of wife I ended up receiving, but that happens when you marry out of societal expectation.

I was standing inside an empty side room of St. Matthew's Catholic Church, waiting for the moment to head toward the altar. The wedding waiting list was just shy of three years long. Yet, they made an exception for my mother, who desperately pleaded with whoever would listen to let her watch her only son get married before her impending death. I should mention that she's still alive and physically well. However, her soul was long gone. I was anxiously trying to smooth down my stubborn cowlick with a pinch of hair wax when a hard knock struck the wooden door.

"Come on in," I said, "it's open."

Henry "Hank" Mallory was not an intimidating man. Yet on that day, there was an unsteadiness about his demeanor. Hank pulled out a fine black comb, plucked it twice, and then centered me directly in front of the large oval mirror to the right of the doorway. Gently and meticulously, he ran the comb through my thick black strands of unruly hair.

"You don't have to do this," I said, "I have it under control."

Hank, who was concentrating so hard that the tip of his tongue stuck out, continued smoothing each hair that was out of line.

"Listen, Ted, I've been meaning to have a talk with you," he said.

This was not a request; it was a demand.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Hank continued combing, digging deeper into my scalp with each stroke of the comb. "Sir, that's starting to—" I began to plead for the sake of my sore scalp, but he intervened.

"Marla is my baby girl," he said, "when she came into this world, I knew that she was sensitive. She cried more than any of her sisters. Every little thing someone says or does affects her, good or bad. She's not like you or me, okay? She's innocent. You, my boy, are now in charge of making sure that innocence is preserved. Do you understand?"

Before being given a chance to speak a single word, he held up his hand, signaling me to stop. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, beat-up silver pocket watch. Unmistakably a hand-me-down. He grabbed my right hand,

AVAXHOME-

the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages
Brand new content
One site

AVXLIVE.ICU

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu

extending my fingers to form a flat surface, and gently lowered the watch onto my clammy palm. As I examined that dingy watch, unease swept over me. The day we officially became family, and it was starting off on a bad foot. I didn't want his scraps; a good father-in-law would buy a brand-new watch for a brand-new son-in-law.

"This," he said, "was my father's watch. It survived many years of heartache, distance, and World War I. If it can survive through anything and still tick, then so can you and Marla."

I placed the watch into my pants pocket before shaking his hand. Hank gripped my hand hard, as if we had just made a blood pact, before releasing his grasp and patting my shoulder. He focused his eyes intently on mine one last time before pointing at my pocket and saying, "Remember what I said; keep ticking."

I collected my suitcase from the backseat and made my way up her bricked front steps. I rang the doorbell twice, then heard *a-woo-woo-woo* howling from inside the house. Jackie's German Shepherd, Rio, ran wild from window to window in search of the possible intruder. His long nails clacked against the floor, like a tap dancer in full motion. She popped her head through the crack in the partially opened front door to find me standing there, in my button-up pajamas, complete with a scowl on my face. "Oh darling, what happened?" she asked, before motioning me to come inside. I staggered through the entryway, careful to not get too close to Rio's anxious teeth. Jackie pulled me into a comforting hug and then rubbed my back in a circular pattern while whispering, "It's okay, whatever happened, you're okay." When she finally pulled back to

inspect my weary face, I told her the latest news.

"It's finally over, honey," I said.

"She's giving you a divorce?" she asked.

I nodded slowly while releasing a huge breath of pent-up frustration, courtesy of the last year with Marla. There wouldn't have to be anymore lies and sneaking around. We could have a night out on the town, minus the soft whispers of paranoia filling our ears. In all ways a man and a woman should be, Jackie and I were finally free to be together. Frankly, I never meant for another relationship to happen; it just did, gradually over time. The day Marla discovered she was pregnant was also the day when our marriage began slipping from my grip. After months of trying, I was thrilled to finally have created a child. My joy was extinguished after a short drive from our apartment to Hank's house to deliver the good news in person.

As we weaved through lanes and crossed bridges toward the edge of Ocean City, I began to imagine a life with my child.

"It's going to be a boy, right?" I said.

Marla giggled before rubbing her still-flattened belly. Daydreams of my little boy flowed through my mind on the drive. My son sat high on my shoulders as we strolled along the boardwalk in the warm sunshine of June. Seeing the wooden roller coaster climb high before free falling briefly with joyous screams emanating from its passengers. For my son, things would be different, such as having a stable childhood with a devoted father present. At least this was my good intention. When we finally pulled into the driveway, Hank walked outside to greet Marla. Smiling, he opened her passenger side door while I grabbed the spaghetti casserole dish she made for

dinner. Hank hugged her, kissed both her cheeks, and asked her to go inside. I yanked down the trunk door with one hand while holding the bowl with the other. When I turned toward the walkway, blocking my path was a fiery Hank. His penetrating stare cut through me as I watched veins pop out along his neck and forearms.

"Are you still upholding your end of the deal?" he said.

My hands gripped the sides of the ceramic dish. The *tick, tick, tick* of the pocket watch flooded my memory. As did Hank's "fatherly advice."

"What's done outside of the marriage stays there. You're never to bring any of that to Marla, do you understand me?" he said.

I knew what he was referring to, as rumors tended to spread like the flu among the folk of Cherry Hill. Jackie and I were just coworkers then, albeit friendly coworkers. She was admirable as one of the top female realtors and was personable. She would flirt with me at the office, and sure, I would play along. But it was all in good, clean fun. If someone already doesn't like you, then rumors of an affair fit perfectly into their *Reasons to Not Like This Person* box. Such was the case with Hank because before I got one moment to defend myself to the old man, he turned on his heel and walked back inside his home. I was left standing outside with that damn casserole and my pride. As if someone lit a fuse inside of me, I lost my cool in exchange for an irrepressible wrath. I threw that damn casserole against the garage door, releasing a tidal wave of curses as it shattered. Bright red marina splashed onto the metal door like an ink blot. On the ground below was the spaghetti

and chunks of broken white ceramic mixed throughout. I kicked the garage door, making a circular dent. “Shit,” I said as I tried to straighten the cavity, to no avail. After a few minutes, I composed myself and walked inside, empty handed. Their confused stares spoke aloud.

“I slipped on something, and the dish flew out of my hands,” I said.

Hank laughed and shook his head in disbelief.

“You can’t do one thing right, can you, Ted?” he said.

Marla avoided my gaze and ignored the disrespect her father had just dished out to me. He began rummaging around in his pantry and fridge while I sat down on the floral sofa in the living room. Oddly enough, I wouldn’t have to deal with his mouthing off for another day. While mowing his lawn the following morning, Hank collapsed and died from a massive heart attack. Gus, his neighbor, found him face down on the lawn with the mower still roaring. As far as I was concerned, his opinions of me were buried with his body. He tried to swindle me one last time after he died. During the reading of his will, we discovered that he left the house to another relative. This was Hank’s way of sending me another jab that reeked of my “inadequacy” as a man. One afternoon, a few weeks later, the estate lawyer called Marla to let her know that the house was ours. When we asked why, the lawyer said, “he requested for the house to be transferred to Hank’s daughter. The only stipulation was that he remain the owner of the land itself until his death.” At least someone possessed good sense in that family. After the paperwork was completed, we moved in right away. Unfortunately, Hank’s death caused a huge ripple in my

relationship with Marla. It turns out that in death, it's hard to get them completely out of your life for good.

The funeral was quick, but the grief over the loss of Hank lingered for Mar, who completely fell off the wagon of reality. Life must go on, for me at least. I wasn't going to stand around sulking.

"It's time to move onward, Mar," I said, "honestly, how much longer are you going to be like this?"

We were both standing in the cramped kitchen, overrun with dirty dishes and sticky countertops. After working all day at the office, a man should come home to a warm plate on the kitchen table surrounded by his family. I came home to a radio blasting any semblance of quiet and an open jar of unsalted peanuts on the greasy stove. My briefcase slammed down to the tiled floor below my feet as I went in search of my wife. I found her lounging about in our unmade bed surrounded by small piles of clothes. A small bump outline under the sheets displayed her first-trimester pregnancy. But judging by her gaunt forearms and legs, you'd never guess she was expecting. She ate like a fidgety bird, never allowing herself to simply sit down and eat a full meal. But during the pregnancy and after Hank's death, it was as if all food repulsed her. I let some things slide during the allotted grieving period. But with her antics harming my child, the edge of reason was finally breached. In addition to her dramatic performances, I'd begun to find the mere sight of her repulsive.

"Have you eaten anything today?" I asked.

She lay there impassively, the sides of her frumpy pillow squeezed tightly like an unhappy child hugging their stuffed

animal.

"It's not all about you, Mar. The baby needs nutrition to grow. Try and think about someone other than yourself, for once," I said.

In typical Marla-esque fashion, she nodded her pretty little head and began crying wordlessly. As tears spilled down her flushed cheeks, irritation arose inside of me. Our relationship, which once was filled with so much ease, was now swapped with revulsion. Later that evening, she still moped about as she began filling up the kitchen sink with soapy water. She unenthusiastically scrubbed each plate clean, producing white streaks of soap on the pristine Corelle. I walked outside to the front yard in desperate need of physical space from her shenanigans. I smiled as I walked right up to the freshly planted azaleas. I planted a dozen assorted sizes along the walkway the previous weekend. They were small but presented immense potential for blossoming into full shrubs full of a million variations of pinks, reds, purples, and white. It reminded me of rainbow jimmies atop a round birthday cake. With fresh topsoil and firmly planted roots, I transformed the lawn from a boring stretch of ordinary grass to a magnificent front yard sprinkled with lively color.

I admired the azaleas for their tenacity to thrive among the poison hidden within their very core. If a single bee dares to gather pollen from an azalea, they unknowingly carry death back to their hive. A batch of honey containing azalea pollen becomes lethal to those who consume it. A small teaspoon mixed in your granny's afternoon cup of tea will deliver her to heaven nonstop. The bees are ignorant accomplices in the

azaleas' natural vengeance. Misfortune follows when azaleas are exploited.

With the azaleas' fruition also came another adaptation within my life. My flirty friendship with Jackie transformed into a serious partnership. We first teamed up, professionally, within Cherry Hill Realty to appeal to married buyers. We played the role of a husband-and-wife team flawlessly. There's just no denying genuine chemistry, so business was booming. The jig was perfect, appearance-wise. Jackie wore her wedding ring, though widowed for a few years. I kept my ring on when needed but yanked it off as soon as I was out of sight of the buyers. The ring caused me great physical pain every time it slipped onto my finger. The skin underneath often turns blotchy from irritation. One day, after we closed on a huge sale, Jackie suggested we celebrate with drinks. Well, drinks turned into dinner, which turned into a nightcap at a hotel room on the boardwalk. I told Jackie the truth about the status of the marriage with Mar. "I want a divorce, but I'm waiting until my son is born safely," I told her while still wrapped around her naked, sweaty body. We talked for hours, which included devising a plan for my post-divorce from Mar.

"The court won't give you that house," Jackie said, "especially since she's the mother of your child. But if we can prove that she's incapable of raising Henry, you could get sole custody. Can you think of anything that would prove she's unfit?"

A million opportunities ran through my mind. She was emotionally manipulative and, most importantly, only thought of herself at the risk of her son's welfare and mine. Since

marrying Marla, my life has become plagued with difficulties. Thinking back to the wedding day, her own father attempted to coach me through what he knew would be a miserable marriage with his rotten daughter.

"Whatever you decide to do, Ted, I'll be here waiting. We can start our life together, the marriage and family you deserve to have," she said before straddling me once more. Afterward, as I lay in that creaky hotel bed with Jackie naked in my arms, I devised my own rescue mission.

The next morning, over a pot of coffee and a recent yellow pages book, I began calling divorce lawyers in south New Jersey. I explained the situation, excluding my relationship with Jackie, and sought legal advice on how to get full custody of my son. Of the eight lawyers I spoke to, seven instantly declined to help me. Their excuses ranged from "the mother always wins" to "disparagement of the other parent is an automatic loss, and we only take cases we know will play out in court." One lawyer offered me a sliver of hope and in-person counsel. Peter Jacobson, an old-timer who has practiced law since the Great Depression, greeted me in the waiting room with a smile and a wave of his copper cane.

"Please, Theodore, take a seat. We have much to discuss," he said.

As I sat down on the chair, air gradually emptied from the cushion, releasing a lengthy, deafening whistle. Mr. Jacobson coughed into his hand, hacked up a wad of mucus, and spat it into his embroidered handkerchief. He tucked that dirty cloth back into his pocket while he stated, "Look, Ted, I'm going to give it to you straight. You will not get full custody of your

son without proving that your ex-wife is unfit. Plain and simple." I nodded and opened my mouth to implore a desperate plea for counsel, but he interrupted me.

"I win cases. You know how? By accepting that nothing is to be taken personally. It's all one giant dirty game of who's willing to do whatever's necessary to win. We all do things that are not considered "acceptable" by society. There must be something about her that would trouble any mother-partial judge," he said.

"Are you asking me to lie?" I said.

"No, I'm asking you to consider how badly you want full custody. And to speak your truth, whatever in the Sam Hill that may be," he said.

I sat there, baffled, with a million scenarios running through my mind. The foremost one involved watching Mar whisper lies into my son's ear throughout future years. I watched as his toothless smile slowly straightened, then turned into an outright scowl as he became a man. God only knew what lies she would tell him to make him hate me, to make him think I ran out on him. If she could lie, so could I. Only my lies were justified.

"She hardly ate when she was carrying my son, and now she's skin and bones. And," I paused, in search of inspiration, "she drinks. A lot."

Peter took out his notepad and began jotting down everything I said. The stories that flew out of my mouth and onto that ruled piece of paper astounded me. At the end of our meeting, Peter skimmed over his notes, contemplating any details I may have "missed." We shook hands, as he said, "I think

we have a great start here."

"A start? But you said..." I began.

"I'll tell you what, Ted. Let me make a few phone calls to some friends downtown. I know quite a few judges; I went to law school with a few of 'em. I'll be in touch once I get a feel of your case's outcome," he said.

Every day that Peter kept me waiting was another day spent away from Henry. I simply could not walk back into that house without saving my son too. Everything in that house is rightfully mine, give or take some musky décor from Hank. She never lifted a finger to support our family, so why should she get to live comfortably? No one considered how much this affected me, and what I was being forced to give up just so I could live a happy life. Bitterness festered inside me, having spread like a ravenous cancer. Finally, almost a week later, my presumed redemption arrived. The phone in my office rang while I was eating lunch at my cubicle and mindlessly staring at the latest housing report. "This is Ted with Cherry Hill Realty. How may I—" I said before being cut off by a wet hacking sound on the other end, followed by gurgling.

"Ted, it's Peter Jacobson," he said, "I was able to review your case and talk with a judge. We went over your file, and I'm sorry to say that it won't hold up in court. It's a no-go, son."

Huffs replaced my hurried breaths. The blood rushed to my head in a fuming rage. "These days, this is typical because the mother always wins." He paused, as if carefully selecting his next words. "Do you want my advice?" He freely offered his opinion before I could respond, saying, "Learn to play ball with your wife and share. Otherwise, it's the tale of David and

Goliath. Before abruptly hanging up, he said, “And Ted, you sure as hell aren’t David.”

Sometime after that call, I must’ve made my way out of the office and back to my car. Before I knew it, I was parked in my driveway, staring up at the second-floor window. Henry’s window. The afternoon sun sneakily turned into twilight stars. I reached for the pocket watch stashed in the glove compartment. I noticed that, at once, an odd silence filled the car. Using the streetlight above, I opened the cover. As I suspected, the ticking hand was motionless. It died sometime last week, along with any hope of winning. I threw it back into the compartment and slammed my fist onto the dash. I didn’t have a grand plan for what I was about to do. I only knew that I wanted to grab anything that could fit into the trunk of my car before everything was taken away from me forever in court.

I quietly stepped out from the driver’s side and began walking toward the garage. Along the way were my azaleas, which were beautifully lined up against the walkway. I reached out my hand to examine the flowers, only to discover a slight movement among the leaves. I ran back to the trunk of my car and found my Eveready flashlight. I quickly ran back to the azaleas and pushed up the button. The circular light revealed hundreds, if not thousands, of tiny black and red caterpillars. They swarmed my plants, covered every limb, and ate away at the azaleas’ leaves.

My hands dove into the azalea core and began scooping out as many of these fuzzy bastards as I could grasp. I threw handfuls of bugs to the ground, then violently began stomping. I pounded my right foot over and over again, squashing away.

But it wasn't enough, as I snapped off branches of my beloved plants and threw them all around the front yard in a fury.

I jogged over to the garage door and came face-to-face with the dent. Embedded in that dark crevice were mocking recollections of my disastrous marriage. All the glares from Hank that screamed of my inadequacy as a man. Of the time spent making a family yet being denied a stable home life. Fighting to survive amid an unbearable marriage. How, at that very moment, Mar was upstairs in my house, cradling my son to sleep in the bed I bought. My emotional boiling point became a complete nuclear meltdown. Punch after punch hit that dent as I screamed unintelligibly. I was an absolute maniac, driven mad by a woman who ruined my life for no good reason other than she could.

I heard a man's voice shout behind me that he would be "calling the police!" It didn't matter, as nothing but an act of God could stop me then. I didn't care if the whole damn neighborhood was outside watching. Good, I thought to myself, let them see what a man driven to insanity looks like. After one final hit, I pulled back my fist to examine the damage. The frayed skin around my knuckles seeped blood. I surveyed the numerous blank faces at all corners of the street. Some stared down from their upstairs windows; some stood on their front steps, wrapped warmly in their robes. Knowing that my time was scarce before the cops arrived, I walked over to the azaleas.

I looked up toward the crowd once more and screamed, "You see these?" I said while nodding toward the azaleas, "These are mine!" I dropped to my knees, then clawed away at the topsoil. Handfuls of dirt were flung behind my shoulder as I

dug for the appearance of roots. I pulled up two baby azaleas, rose to my feet, and peered up toward Henry's window. Henry was seated on his mother's left hip, with her arm wrapped around his waist. Both were looking down at me. She stared silently while Henry sobbed into her chest. I waited for her to do something, maybe scream or cry. To be outraged, terrified. Yet no reaction was given.

"Is this what you want?" I screamed.

The cold metal of a shotgun slowly pressed into my back. A male voice instructed me to "slowly turn around." Though both hands still grasped my azaleas, I did as I was told. The police arrived at the house in record time. "Officer," I began while I turned around cautiously, "I need you to call my lawyer, Peter Ja…" Much to my surprise, there wasn't a shiny badge on that man's chest. Gus, our elderly neighbor, aimed his gun directly into my ribs as I raised my hands into the air. A glimmer of a smile spread across his face. In the years of seeing this man occasionally from a distance, a permanent scowl seemed plastered on his face. But as he held my life hostage with the end of his gun, the old bastard smiled. Every ounce of anger coursing through my veins was instantly swapped with fear. I tried to speak, to plead with him, but my voice broke each time. With the gun locked onto its target, Gus looked up toward Mar in the window, then nodded.

When you're experiencing such chaos and panic, you don't usually have the critical regretful-words filter activated in your brain, which makes it easier to speak without thinking first. Such was the case when I said, "Can't you see what she's done to me?" I began. "This is all her fault!" Gus took a backward

step. “I’d say you did well all by yourself,” he said as he pumped the barrel, “and what a bang-up job you did.” The air shattered all around me. In a single shot and a few ticks of time, my body fell to the lawn with a heavy thud. Something warm trickled down my abdomen as my eyes focused on the cloudy night sky above. Specks of stars twinkled as my throat tightened with each labored breath. In the stillness after the violence, a long-forgotten sound sprung to life. An eerily monotonous rhythm of a resilient pocket watch, *Tick-tick-tick-tick.* The thumping striking rigorously within my chest. Sirens and red and blue flashing lights approached in the distance. As an officer approached with his weapon drawn, Gus threw the gun to the ground. “He was trespassing on my property!” he yelled, throwing his hands in the air.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. When do you think Marla and the narrator's marriage initially started to go wrong? Was it before or after they got married? Was it before or after the narrator started sleeping with Jackie?
2. Why do you think Marla married the narrator in the first place? Why do you think the narrator married Marla in the first place? What initially attracted them to each other?
3. Hank told the narrator, "She's innocent. You, my boy, are now in charge of making sure that innocence is preserved." What do you think he meant by that? Do you think there was something wrong with Marla that made her partially responsible for the failed marriage?
4. If the narrator and Jackie had gotten married, do you think they would have had a successful marriage? Why or why not?
5. What, if anything, could the narrator or Marla have done to save their marriage? At what point in the marriage would they have had to do it?

* * *

One Hour

Todd Sullivan

* * *

I was twenty-seven when I was given the assignment to interview Mysol. I was a journalist at Peachtree Readers and was six months engaged to a witty girl I had met in graduate school. All I knew about Mysol before the interview was that he was Indian. He had opened a restaurant named One Hour several months earlier. It was located in Stone Mountain, a small county outside of Atlanta. The restaurant was only open one hour every day, from midnight to one o'clock in the morning. This strange premise was what interested Peachtree Readers.

I headed out to One Hour around 6 p.m. the day of the interview. I was unfamiliar with Stone Mountain and got lost several times trying to find the restaurant. I finally found the street which branched off into a lightly wooded area. A short stone marker on the side of the road indicated that I was going the right way. I pulled into the empty lot outside of the restaurant around 7 p.m. The parking lot was small and looked

like it was made for about two dozen cars. The sun had set, but light lingered in the sky reassuring me. The idea of being out there in that deserted area alone made me apprehensive, but the restaurant eased my mind. I had had no expectations before I arrived on how One Hour would look.

I can still say I was surprised.

An elaborate garden surrounded the building. I started down the pathway leading through the garden to One Hour. Purple violets, red roses, white lilies, and a multitude of other beautifully hued flowers populated the garden. A thick, flowery fragrance exuded from the foliage and wrapped around me. I became calm as I walked down the path covered with speckled pebbles. Clouds tinted bright orange by the dying light spread in motionless waves blanketing the sky. Birds swooped across the path and sang, hidden in the distant trees. A chorus of raspy voices from unseen bugs lifted from the garden like some nature-orchestrated symphony. Several poles topped by radiating bulbs lighted the way along the path. I felt like I was dreaming. The surroundings were just that surreal, and I caught myself wondering if any of it *was* real.

The pathway led me to the front doors of the simply constructed building. The brick walls rose about twenty feet into the air. A wooden roof domed the circular building. *One Hour* was inscribed in the surface of the dark doors. I knocked on the thick wooden double doors, but the sound was muffled, and I was afraid I wouldn't be heard. I started to knock again, but the door suddenly opened, and I was allowed to enter.

"Hello. You must be Mr. D'Angelo. I am Mysol."

All I knew about Mysol before I met him was that he was

Indian. I had no ideas beyond that of his appearance.

Mysol was a head shorter than me, maybe five foot four inches tall. He wore a loose, long-sleeved white shirt and billowing white pants. Thin-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He was plump, with a round stomach and fleshy arms. His face was clean shaven and wrinkled, his hair short and gray. He moved in a light, bouncing manner as if he walked on clouds. He looked about sixty years old.

"Hello Mysol. It's a pleasure to meet you."

I shook his hand and noticed how soft his skin was, like the flesh of a newborn baby. He smiled. Something about his smile stunned me. It was bright, it seemed to radiate with light and strength. I later discovered that his smiles and laughter professed profound joy.

Mysol led me inside into the foyer. A hanging chandelier dimly lit the small room. Two plush sofas sat against the walls. A reception podium stood in the center of the room. A set of closed double doors across from the entrance bore the words *Dining Room*.

"Is there anywhere in particular you would like to be interviewed?"

"You can start your interview now, Mr. D'Angelo."

"Ro'sed," I said automatically. I felt out of place in this ethereal environment, and thought maybe if I made things between Mysol and myself a little more informal, I would become more comfortable.

"Ro'sed," Mysol corrected with a smile. "You may ask your questions as I show you the restaurant."

"I'm going to be recording this," I said as I fished in my

pocket for the tape recorder. “The interview won’t take very long. You’re probably very busy.”

“I’m in no rush, Ro’sed. It’s early, and I don’t open for another five hours.” He stared at me as if searching for something, and I felt he actually stared through me, or into me. Then he asked, “Have you had your supper yet?”

“No, I haven’t,” I quickly said. “But I’m fine. Don’t worry...”

“Nonsense. This is a restaurant. Its purpose is to feed those who are hungry. It would be sacrilege to allow this interview on an empty stomach. Here of all places.”

He reached for a menu beneath a compartment in the reception podium and gave it to me. A plain dirt road leading to an equally plain village was on the cover. I wondered if this was a picture from India. I opened the menu and scanned the dishes available. There were appetizers, salads, soups, the main course, and desserts. I noticed only a small portion of the items were Indian. Something from every part of the world filled the extensive menu list.

One Hour can provide many other dishes not listed on this menu.

Some ingredients need time to be shipped. Simply call in advance for any special requests.

This offer was written at the top of the page. I glanced up at Mysol, thinking that to be a bold statement. I started to wonder what this old man from Bombay could do. I looked back down at the prices. The cheapest item was twenty dollars. The most expensive was more than a hundred dollars. I didn’t want to choose anything too difficult, but my mouth salivated

when I saw the three different types of duck available. Their prices ranged from forty-five to eighty dollars, however, and I started to look elsewhere for something cheaper.

"What just caught your attention?"

I quickly looked back up at Mysol. I hadn't realized I made a visible reaction. He looked at me with intent, bright eyes from behind his glasses. I thought maybe I should lie, but I was held by his gaze and found myself unable to.

"The roasted duck."

"Excellent. Follow me."

He reached out and gently touched my arm. I followed him to the doors, and he opened both of them at the same time and revealed the marvel of the Dining Room.

The Dining Room was wide, maybe sixty yards in width. I hadn't expected it to be so big. It seemed like it shouldn't have been able to fit in the building. Ten round tables with bright tablecloths were clustered close together on the hard floorboards in the center of the dining room. I thought the sitting area was too intimate, considering the size of this room, and would irritate some guests who preferred not to be seated so near other guests.

"The arrangement of the tables was done purposely. As you can see, there is clearly enough room for there to be more space between each group of people. But I have had not one complaint since I opened my doors four months ago. I believe in family. Not just blood family. I believe all humans are brothers and sisters. I also believe food is the center of each family. It's the time to get together, talk about one's day and about one's life to his or her family. It's a gathering time. I

promote that here at my restaurant. For one hour every night, each person who comes to eat here feels like part of the whole. The whole of mankind."

The rest of the room was rising stone levels flanking both sides of the seating area. I followed Mysol to the right of the restaurant so that I could have a better look. Several long levels filled with baskets extended from one side of the dining room to the other. Several pairs of stairs led up to the top level. The baskets on the bottom level were filled with ripe fruit. The assortment of fruit was varied and as international as the menu. They looked fresh and damp as if picked seconds ago.

"Have one."

I picked up a large red apple and stared at it for a second. Suddenly, I was very hungry. All I wanted to do was eat, so I took a big bite from the apple and chewed slowly. The taste was rich. The apple was juicy and hard. As I chewed, I felt lighter, and a faint whisper of a memory surfaced within my thoughts.

I started writing very young. As a child, I had a desk in my room with all of my notepads in it. I remembered filling spiral pad after spiral pad with childish scribbling, but those were my first efforts at fiction. I remembered how excited I became at putting my thoughts on paper.

I saw this younger version of myself coming up with adventures and writing them into words, and I grew sad as I realized how far off I had fallen from my dreams. I would have never thought I would become a journalist. I had grown up with a passion for fiction writing and, by my freshmen year in college, had completed more than a dozen short stories and had even started a novel. I had been so sure I would publish my first

novel by the time I was twenty and had ideas of being America's next young favorite author.

The memories dimmed as Mysol said, "I allow guests to choose any of the fruits from these baskets as they wait for their meals. This level is complimentary."

I followed Mysol up several steps to the second level. These baskets were filled with loose spices, salt, pepper and curry. Little spoons stuck out of the different shades of the seasonings, and tiny containers hung on the sides of the baskets. A narrow aisle ran along each level so that Mysol could easily get to any of the baskets lined up along the tiers. He collected several spices in mini wooden bowls as I stood there, eating my apple, thinking about childhood, and fighting off sudden thoughts of self-failure. The weight of the tape recorder in my other hand reminded me why I was actually here. I did have a job to do and decided to start the interview with the basics. I asked, "When did you first become interested in cooking?"

"In cooking or in food?"

"Either one."

"My mother was a fantastic cook. I grew up in Bombay. Life as a child for me was full, in every sense of the word. I had many friends. I had many cousins, aunts, and uncles. It seemed like back then I was always active. So many events going on around me, and I, as a child, gazing out in awe just trying to understand this chaos. But at the center of all my memories of youth was my mother's food. She was a great cook. She had an art for it. When family visited us, they would make requests for my mother to cook *samosa*, *dhai pueri* and *mali khafta*. Sometimes I wonder what she could have accomplished if she

had solely devoted her life to cooking."

"So, it was your mother who awakened your interests in the culinary arts?"

"Yes. I love food. I love the taste. I love the texture. I love the way good food fills me and lifts my spirit. I've always had a healthy appetite, which explains this round stomach of mine. I never overindulged, you understand. But I did indulge."

We went up another two levels as Mysol collected more ingredients. One level consisted of vegetables just as fresh as the fruit. Another was rice, pastas and noodles. The last level didn't have baskets, but glass jugs of clear water. Crystal bottles were beside each jug. He filled one, and we started back down to the bottom. As I followed Mysol, I wondered where all of the other staff were and voiced my question to him.

"There is no one else but me. You're surprised? Most people are when they come here. I am only open an hour every day. I insist on reservations, and they are always at midnight. I greet my guests, seat them, take their orders, cook, and serve them."

"All in one hour?"

He smiled.

"And people don't feel rushed?"

"I haven't had a complaint yet. You see, Ro'sed, One Hour is mine. And I belong to One Hour. This place is me. These walls are filled with me. You would be surprised what you can accomplish when you know, not think, not believe, but know it is possible.

"I've walked a long, arduous road to achieve what I have today. I have paid my price. And still, I know I have not

achieved what I truly set out to achieve. You will not understand these words today, Ro'sed. Maybe one day you will. I hope one day you will. If I had truly accomplished what I set out to, I would be dead now."

Mysol's words were confusing. He hinted at an ideology that went beyond food and cooking. His words made me think about my own life. How different would things be for me now if I knew I could become America's next favorite young author, as I once believed was possible? Had I ever been ready for the struggle to create? It was true that I had written much throughout my first two years of college, but there had always been something wrong with my words. Characterization was never realistic enough. Dialogue was too hackneyed and artificial. Plots weren't unique and fresh, and sentence structure was weak. In those days, my personal journal had become thick with rejection letters from magazines I had queried.

School hadn't improved my writing, and my parents had pressured me to change my major to journalism. They thought journalism and fiction writing both boiled down to words on paper. I became tired of arguing week after week with my mother and father, and one day I simply stopped going to school. I needed time to decide if I wanted to continue that battle against reality to be an author.

My parents didn't give me that time. Even though I had been living away from home, they were still supporting me. They threatened to cut me off if I didn't go back to school and get a degree. The starving artist was a nice, romantic idea, but the actual life seemed too harsh. Having to struggle month after month to pay bills on the little money I would be making terrified me. By the end of that year, I had given up and decided

to go back to school and change my major to journalism.

Yet now I wondered how my life would have become if I hadn't made that decision. Mysol's own struggle had been similar to mine, and now made me wonder what I had been, or still was, actually capable of doing. What if I had known that I could fulfill my dreams of writing great words? Did knowing I could mean that I would? And what about the risk considering the consequences of failure?

We walked across the dining room to another set of double doors marked *Kitchen*. I had to figure out how Mysol had come to his revelations. What had he sacrificed to achieve what he had? I wanted to know more about Mysol's personal life, so asked, "Are you married?"

"No. I am not married, and I have no children. I don't even have a dog."

"What about your family? Are any of them here in this country?"

"Some, yes. But I have not seen any of them in years."

"You're totally alone?" I asked him, amazed.

Mysol laughed. A warmth spilled from him and brushed against me. My body suddenly felt weightless, and I thought I would drift away on an invisible cloud.

"These things will be hard to explain to you, Ro'sed," he said, gazing at me. "People search for others in an effort to find themselves. In an effort to fill their souls. The majority of people in this world have never fully come to realize for themselves who they are and what they are capable of. They search within themselves for self, and so often come up with nothing. So they reach out to their neighbors to, in a way, fill this void they believe exists inside of them. But it is not true,

Ro'sed. Let no one fool you. The infinite is you, and because it is you, you as a person can understand it."

He opened the large kitchen doors and stepped inside. Once again, the size of the kitchen could not be explained by the seeming size of the building. The kitchen was huge. There were numerous stoves and large ovens. There were refrigerators built into the walls. There were four walk-in freezers. Pots, pans, and utensils hung from racks suspended from the ceiling. The kitchen was spotless and had a pale marble floor.

Mysol started taking out different items and placed them here and there in the kitchen. He put the spices on one of the counters. He took out a plump duck hanging in one of the refrigerators and put it on a glass platter. Mysol never hesitated in his movements. He knew where everything was. He knew exactly what he wanted when it was needed. He was extremely graceful for his age; it almost seemed like he danced. I fell into a trance as I stared at him. Time passed, but I was dimly aware of it. I wasn't sure whether he did not float at times, no longer touching the earth as he cooked. I started second-guessing myself and wondered if this portly Indian was human at all.

Then it was over. The meal was prepared. We went back into the dining room and sat down at one of the smaller tables. He sat across from me and watched as I took my first bite. The duck was delicious. Tender. Moist. Full. I ate slowly, chewing carefully to taste every aspect of the meat. I felt like I was consuming more than food. There was something else about this meal, something incredible. I felt the beginnings of an ecstatic eruption within my soul. Suddenly the wall separating my dreams and my reality became blurred, and I could see

through that wall and discovered the bridge spanning both worlds. I knew I couldn't walk that bridge in the state I was in now. I had allowed reality too much reign over my life, but I also knew it wasn't too late. An understanding of each individual's possibilities dawned over the stagnant twilight I had allowed to exist inside of me. I could be more than who I had allowed myself to become.

I looked up at Mysol in sleepy awe after I finished and returned his intent gaze.

"How?" was all I was able to utter.

"Do you think it's some kind of magic? In the way you perceive things, maybe it is. Man does not realize his capabilities. We can do wondrous things, Ro'sed. Wondrous, wondrous things! For years I studied the culinary arts. I started my pursuit around twenty. I left my family one day with little money and simply started traveling. I went from city to city, village to village in India. Learning. Studying. Then I moved on past India. I was obsessed with this passion for food. I managed to talk my way into four-star restaurants and worked under renowned chefs. I learned from people with no notoriety, people who were only locally known in their area as good cooks. I took chances, I let those who I wanted to learn from see the fire in my eyes. Soon, I was never turned away. People saw the love I had for the craft, and not even the most difficult of them had the heart to say no to me. For seven years I was always in a kitchen. Day and night. I was always experimenting, recording recipes, discovering ways to make the dishes better than those who taught me. I learned just enough foreign words in each country to communicate with those I was learning from. I traveled many lands with little money, several large

books holding culinary secrets, and love of food.

"I was in America when I was twenty-seven. I was living out west at the time working in a small restaurant in Northern California. I still remember the day I came to fully understand myself. It was evening. I seldom took days off, but I had been trying to figure out something inside of myself for the past several months, and this day I had no desire to work.

"I was walking down a trail in the forest near the city I lived in. I had been walking for hours, my head bowed in thought. I sat down on a tree stump and stared up at the night sky. I was far from the lights of the city, and the black sky was crowded with stars. It was a beautiful night, and my thoughts flowed freely.

"You see, Ro'sed, over that past year, I had been struck by a depression. I suppose the depression had always existed in me from the beginning of my travels, but now it had come to the forefront, not to be ignored. I felt a detachment from my meals. A spiritual detachment. I always worked hard at every dish I prepared, but I still felt that my actions were mechanical. What I cooked was simply food. Good food, yes, but just food.

"I thought about that then as I sat beneath the night's sky staring up into its limitlessness. And as I sat there, an enlightenment settled upon me. All my life, I had been trying to be a great chef. A creator. I had books and books of recipes. Yet I still had not been satisfied. And I came to realize that true creation needs a piece of the creator to live. In every art, this rings the same. Art is man's attempt to imitate the gods, but not every artist is willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice. The sacrifice of their soul."

I looked away from Mysol and thought back to my childhood again. I drifted through the scattered fragments of dreams of who I once believed I could become. I remembered growing up with a pencil and paper being my constant companions. I remembered the joy and fulfillment I got from writing. I remembered deciding I would be an author. I would create.

Then I remembered college. I remembered the rejection letters. I remembered the creative writing classes where nothing I wrote ever measured up. I remembered my parents pressuring me to change my major to journalism for my own good. I remembered my fiancée who I was supposed to marry in less than six months. I remembered the reality I believed I had to accept.

And now all I wondered was one question.

Why?

Why did I have to accept a passionless life? Why didn't I fight for my dreams no matter the costs? I had been so afraid of failure, but was it really failure if I had given all of myself to succeed? Maybe I would never become America's next favorite young author, but I would have discovered myself. I would have realized my reason in life, and nothing which happened to me after could take that knowledge from me.

"It is only through knowing oneself that one can make such a sacrifice of themselves," Mysol continued. "I was twenty-seven when this was revealed to me. Three years later, I had saved enough money to open this restaurant. It would seem a difficult task to some, as I had no money then. But I could no longer be stopped. And I was not."

I peered through the curtains of my dreams and stared hard at Mysol. He was a hazy figure now, and almost seemed to be glowing in front of me. I saw his gray hair, his wrinkles which spoke of old age. Yet...

“How old are you?”

“I am thirty years old, Ro’sed. There is always a price to pay. I pour my spirit into each meal. I give of myself to each person who enters these doors. I give them a newness at the beginning of each day. Midnight.

“I know I will not live very long. Another couple of years, maybe. But this does not bother me. I have touched the infinity of existence. I know there is no such thing as end. We are all the eternal, Ro’sed. Realize this.”

The interview was over. There was nothing left to say. I faintly remember thanking Mysol for his cooperation, thanking him for the images he had revealed to me through himself, thanking him for something I couldn’t even put into words. There were tears in my eyes as I left One Hour. I was no longer the same person I had been before I entered the restaurant. I knew I had been given visions which could inspire me to follow those childhood dreams to a place within myself that not even I could fathom.

I felt like I had been sitting there listening to Mysol for years, but as I walked back to my car, I saw it was only 8 p.m. One hour had passed.

* * *

The author dedicates this story to Mayur Bharuch.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think art is capable of causing a transformative experience like the one Ro'sed experienced in the story? When, if ever, has art so touched you it changed your thinking about life?
2. Is the goal of art to create these kinds of transformative experiences, or can art serve other purposes as well?
3. Ro'sed says, "I could be more than who I had allowed myself to become." Is it wrong to choose safety over following your dreams? When might it be better to choose safety? When is dream following the better choice?
4. Ro'sed says, even if he had followed his dreams of being a writer and failed, he "…would have realized [his] reason in life" and "nothing which happened… could take that knowledge from me." Do you agree, that even the failed pursuit of a dream has value? If so, then why would anyone ever not pursue their dreams?
5. If you had the chance to eat at this restaurant, would you? What do you think the meal would teach you about yourself?

* * *

The Chair of Opportunity

Cory Swanson

* * *

Taylor put his clothes back on and waited in a well-outfitted room. It was far posher than any doctor's office he'd ever been in and he wasn't sure why he'd been given a physical, much less one more thorough than any he'd ever had before.

When they'd called Taylor in, he'd assumed they were concerned with drug use. Guys like him who looked like he did were often treated with suspicion. Maybe it was his tattoos or his shaved head. It was fine. Taylor had nothing to hide. Sure, he liked a good time, but that was usually limited to a glass of nice scotch and a good book. Often, he listened to music, too, and perhaps it was his tastes in this regard that had raised his employer's suspicions. He liked flashy guitars and loud drums, artists who perhaps were guilty of the sins he felt he was being accused of.

Whatever. Taylor could take it. He sat in a chair that

appeared to be several centuries old. *Late Baroque,* he thought, admiring the ornate carvings on the legs and arms. They were nearly as complex as the skull and flame tattoos on his forearms, artwork of which he was particularly proud. The ink had taken time and money to accrue, but he didn't have much else to spend money on. No wife or kids. Taylor liked this freedom. It fit his ethos.

The heavy, oak doors on the other side of the room opened and the frail form of a man in a wheelchair rolled in. The man thanked his helper, who dutifully exited, closing the doors behind him.

"Taylor Albright," the man intoned, his voice aged yet firm.

"Mr. Oakstand," Taylor replied, rising from his seat at the presence of his boss.

"You don't have to get up," Oakstand said, motioning for Taylor to sit, the medical report in his lap. "Especially since I can't do the same."

Taylor had never met his boss before. The company had many layers of management, and he worked in the lower levels, checking software for bugs alongside an army of technicians identical to him in skill and position. It didn't bother Taylor. The job paid for his books and fine whiskey and tattoos. He'd never been asked to take a physical before, not when he'd been hired or at any time in between. It seemed like the kind of thing you did for manual labor, or if you ran heavy machinery.

"I suppose you're wondering why you're here," Oakstand began.

Taylor nodded at the understatement.

"Let me begin with my admiration for you. You're fit and in good health. Your mind is certainly a strong muscle, your ability to cognate among the best I've encountered. You're young but not too young to have a fully mature frontal cortex."

Taylor nodded, unsure what to make of this talk. "Thanks," he said, hopeful it was the right response.

"The tattoos are not quite to my taste, but not a deal-breaker."

Taylor didn't know how to react to this, so he chose not to react at all.

"Your organs are all functioning optimally. No family history of cancer or addiction?"

"Not that I know of," Taylor said, his discomfort growing by the second. "There's a chance some distant relatives have had problems, but nobody ever told me about it."

Oakstand rubbed his hands as though they were cold, the report in his lap. Taylor had seen pictures of the old man before, mostly from when he was younger. He had that Jack Nicholson air of power balanced with good humor, something Taylor imagined had lent to his success. CompCorp was one of the biggest software companies in the world and Oakstand pulled the levers of power within.

The man in the wheelchair was frailer than the one in those old pictures. So much so, Taylor felt a tender moment of contemplation pass over him. How fleeting life is. How transient its blessings.

"Let's cut to the chase," Oakstand said, interrupting Taylor's moment. "I think you understand my position in life, Mr. Albright. I have money. I have power. Enough of each to

sustain the other indefinitely."

Taylor shifted, the notion unsettling him.

"Traditionally, neither of these things can out-balance the laws of nature. Money can't make you live forever, can it?"

Bewildered, Taylor shook his head in agreement.

A smile crossed Oakstand's lips. "What if I told you that chair was four hundred years old?"

Taylor ran his hand over the intricate carvings. "I believe it. Why are you telling me?"

"I'm the original owner of that chair."

A laugh jumped out of Taylor's throat.

"It's true. It was at a little shop in Vienna, the proprietor of which first introduced me to *Haut Tauschen."*

A chill ran down Taylor's spine. Skin swapping? His German skills were pretty good, but he didn't want to be right about this. "What's that?"

"Well, *Herr* Sand hadn't really perfected it yet. He sold his services as something of a novelty. He'd trick a young lady into trading bodies with him for a while, and they'd strut around in each other's skin for the fun of it before trading back. I was the one who realized the implications."

The urge to run burst through Taylor's veins, but he assured himself Oakstand had become senile. "And what were those?" Taylor said, playing along. What could it hurt to humor someone so rich and powerful? Age happened to everyone, didn't it?

"I was wealthy then. Well-heeled, if you will. My father held a dukedom south of the city, and I was his rightful heir. I enjoyed what others couldn't: fine wines, plentiful food, art.

There was little I couldn't have.

"My father took ill when I was fairly young—vomiting, fatigue—and he left this world much at the same time as I met my friend the furniture seller. Along with the dukedom, I inherited all its cares, many of which overwhelmed my young mind."

Taylor leaned forward, elbows on his knees. This story didn't reek of senility, and Taylor felt he was crazy to be drawn in. Still, he couldn't help himself. Oakstand had a way of speaking that intrigued Taylor.

"I began to contemplate life and my place in it. I remember thinking as the shopkeeper demonstrated his powers that wealth and power meant nothing in the face of death. The wealthy die every day. All the money and land in the world couldn't bring back my beloved father."

Oakstand leaned forward, the effort causing pain. "Then I realized what could be done with *Haut Tauschen.* If applied correctly, one would never have to die. One could simply trade to a younger body whenever the necessity arose and assure oneself as long a life as one wished."

The realization washed over Taylor. Was that what he'd been asked here for? Was that the reason for the physical?

Oakstand leaned back in his chair. "Don't worry, I won't make you do anything you don't want to do. I'm only here to make you an offer. I realized long ago the ethical questions this magic proposed. For instance, why is my life more important than another? Do I have more to offer than a young, smart man entering the prime of his life?

"I don't pretend I do. A wealthy life is not worth more

than a poor one. Yet, here I am with all my wealth and yet another failing body. So, this is my offer."

Taylor stood up. "This is crazy. I'm sorry, sir, but this is beyond nuts." Taylor wondered where Oakstand's helper had gone. He needed to tell someone that the old man had gone off his rocker.

"Sit down, Mr. Albright. Like I said, you don't have to accept it. Nor do you have to believe it. Trust me, I can buy your silence if I need to. All I ask is for you to hear me out. You will be compensated."

Taylor took a deep breath and sat down. Regardless of how he felt, this was his boss. All his comfort and stability depended on this man, and money spoke louder than words in situations like these. "Okay," he said. "What's your proposal?"

"To put it bluntly, I want to swap bodies with you. Now," he said, raising his hand to calm Taylor before he could stand again. "I know what you're thinking. Why the hell would you want to trade bodies with me? You're young and virile and I'm old and decrepit. Like I said, money can't buy your health back, so why would you sell it?"

The question made Taylor nervous. Even if what he was saying was true, why would anyone agree to do it?

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah," Taylor said. "Cindy. Why?"

"You're close?"

Taylor smiled. "She's really the only family I have."

"And she's fallen on rough times."

Taylor squinted at the old, huddled mass in front of him. How did he know so much about Taylor? "Yeah."

"She and her son, your nephew, could really use something good in their lives. Her husband left her, and she's struggling to support her family on her meager paycheck."

"Look, I give them all I can. If Nathan needs school clothes, I take him shopping. If Cindy can't get her medicine, I pay for it." Taylor felt himself flush. How had his sister and nephew been dragged into this conversation?

"Yes. It's one of those situations where a little wealth could go a long way to making their lives better."

"You're not trying to convince me to ask her to swap bodies with you, are you?" Taylor couldn't believe these words were coming out of his mouth. They felt raw and uncouth on his tongue.

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. I am male in spirit and I wish to remain so. But imagine what you could do for her in my position."

The thought sat like a brick in the room. Taylor was all his sister had. Their parents never gave either of them a dime. After Keith walked out on her, things had gotten bleak. Taylor prayed every night for a way to help his sister.

"All I propose is a straight swap. I become you and you become me. I am Taylor Albright, software engineer, and you are Phineas Oakstand, wealthy oligarch. My fortune is yours to do with as you wish. I will pass no judgment."

The breath caught in Taylor's throat. Oakstand controlled an unimaginable empire. His fingers were in everything from philanthropy to world politics. Sure, CompCorp was still the center of this universe, but Oakstand represented something so much more. To become him would

be to become a god, a giant among men. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I understand. It’s a hard decision,” Oakstand said, finally leaning back in his chair, his body exhausted by the effort. “For the first time, I may expire before I find someone to truly take the mantle from me.”

Despite the appearance of Oakstand’s frail body, thoughts rushed through Taylor’s head. Money, power, the ability to fix all life’s ills and injustices. “You’d really give it all to me?”

“All except one thing. I will keep the chair you sit in.”

Taylor looked down, aware of the ornate chair once again. “What’s so special about the chair?”

“The chair is everything. Without it, I wouldn’t be here.”

It dawned on Taylor that the chair must hold the magic. Without it, *Haut Tauschen* wouldn’t be possible. He scanned it for devices. Would it trap him? Would it peel his skin?

“Don’t look so alarmed,” Oakstand said with a grin. “It won’t hurt. All I need to do is lay my hand on the back and the work will be done. I will be you and you will be me. But I won’t do it without your consent.”

Taylor nodded. “Can I sleep on it?”

“I would prefer a response before we leave this room today, but I can be patient as we sit. Do give a thought to your sister in your deliberations.”

A notion struck Taylor. Hadn’t Cindy told him she’d been praying for a miracle? How she couldn’t keep going on like this; that the pressure of working three jobs and raising her kid was going to kill her.

"Let's do it," he said.

Oakstand's brow raised. "Are you certain?"

"It would be selfish not to. Cindy and Nathan deserve better. I could give them better if I were you."

"And what of you?"

Taylor leaned forward in the chair. "Is it even a choice? You question the value of wealth in the face of mortality. I question the value of life if I can't help those closest to me. What am I worth? What do I have that's so special?" Taylor refused to wipe the tears that streamed down his cheeks.

"As long as you're certain. I won't be giving your skin back."

Taylor hung his head. "Just do it."

Oakstand's hands went to the wheels of his chair, and he guided himself behind Taylor. Head still hanging, Taylor meditated on all the good he would be doing. Oakstand's empire would accomplish more than saving his sister from poverty, it could literally save the world.

The next moment, Taylor saw himself from behind. His body sat in an ornate chair, carved from some dark wood. The chair looked remarkably well cared for despite its age.

His body stood and turned to him. "Thank you," Oakstand said with Taylor's voice. He picked up the chair with seeming ease and crossed the room to the doors. Someone opened them for him, and he passed from sight.

Taylor looked down at his own shriveled form. His skin was thin and wrinkled as old paper, liver spots sprouting as though they were constellations. His legs would not move under his own command. Clenching his hand, Taylor realized

how much his joints hurt. In a moment, he'd aged fifty years and the shock didn't wear off as Oakstand's helper approached.

"Finally got rid of that old chair I see," the man said.

"I suppose so," Taylor said with Oakstand's voice, an experience so odd, it left him in shock for a few moments.

"I always wondered why nobody was allowed to sit in it."

This made him grin. "Because it's magic."

The servant chuckled. "Sure it is. Are you ready for your lunch?"

Taylor nodded. "That would be nice. And tell me, how can I give money to someone?"

Another chuckle. "You and your philanthropy. As though you've had trouble figuring out how to spend money. Which organization strikes your fancy today?"

"Not an organization, a person. I want to give money to the sister of that man who just left."

The servant rolled his eyes. "Okay, Mr. Oakstand."

"I'm serious. She needs help."

Taylor could tell by the servant's silence he thought Taylor to be senile.

Taylor tried to smile as he was rolled from the room. Regret surged through him. How many years did he have left in this body? What had he given up? What if he couldn't get the money to Cindy and Nathan? What if everyone thought he was going soft and took his control away?

Taylor tried to stand with Oakstand's shriveled legs. He wanted to chase after himself, get the chair back, return to his own body.

"Easy there, Mr. Oakstand," the helper said, restraining

him with his hand. “You remember what happened last time you tried to get up.”

Emotion burst forth. This body was feeble and weak. Taylor had been many things, but he’d never felt so fragile. “I need to find him. I need to give money to his sister.”

“Sure, Mr. Oakstand. We’ll take care of it, okay?” the man said, his voice patronizing. Taylor felt indignant. He wasn’t a child. How could this man speak to him like this? “Now, what would you like to eat today?”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. If you were in Taylor's shoes, would you accept the bargain? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Phineas was ethical in making the offer to switch bodies with someone younger? Can a freely made transaction between two parties ever be unethical?
3. If you could sell years from your life for money, how many years would you sell and for how much money?
4. If you were in Taylor's shoes and made the body switch, what would you do with your newfound wealth and limited time?
5. If you could, at the end of your life, go back to your younger years with nothing but the knowledge you possess, would you do it? Do you think you would be able to replicate, or improve on, the success you had in your first life?

* * *

The Worst Thing You Can Do Is Nothing

C.S. Griffel

* * *

Stanislav did not want to join the army. It was his mother who said he must. Stanislav's father didn't argue. Father had once been brave enough to fly a fighter plane in World War II, but that had been a long time ago. One glorious act of bravery in a man's youth tells you nothing of his future. Reality can steal the wind out of any man's sails, given enough time. An unhappy marriage, a brother in the gulag, and the loss of a child far too young left the family at the mercy of a tired and embittered mother who no longer wanted the burden of feeding a teenage boy. His father should have told her no. But he didn't. When Stanislav had peered into his father's eyes, pleading silently for a lifeline, some kind of support, his father's dead eyes turned away with a shrug of the shoulders and sigh that said, "What can I do?" So, at seventeen, Stanislav shipped off to the army. His parents never left the three-room apartment in the far eastern

Russian port city of Vladivostok. It had been twenty-six years since he boarded a train for Moscow. That was the last time he had taken the seven-day journey or ever would again. Stanislav called his father once a month, just to make sure neither he nor his mother had died.

Life for a Soviet soldier was about the same as it has always been for soldiers. Hard. The training is hard, the sergeants are hard, the food is barely passable and never quite enough. But what could Stanislav do? That was life. If he were a soldier, life would be hard. If he were not a soldier, life would be hard. So, Stanislav worked hard for himself and for his country. And now he was not just Stanislav. He was Comrade Lt. Colonel Petrov, an engineer who had the knowledge and skill to oversee the USSR's most cutting-edge satellite monitoring system, a defense against the nuclear might of the Americans.

Stanislav's trip to work was no simple matter. After his train ride, he had to pass through the first of many security protocols that kept the Soviet defense systems secret. The first was a gate where it was a simple matter of showing his military identification card. Next, it was a shuttle ride from the gate to the massively impressive and intimidating Soviet structure that housed the defense monitoring system. There was a lot of speculative chatter on the bus ride. A few weeks earlier a young pilot flying for the Soviet Air Defense had taken down Korean Air flight 007 which had veered into restricted Soviet airspace. The Americans claimed it was a commercial flight that had veered off course. The *Politburo* informed the citizens of the USSR and the world that it was, in fact, an American spy plane

and a direct provocation to war. Everyone knew this was a lie. The USSR admitted nothing to the Americans.

A fat-faced major speculated, “Do you think the Americans will retaliate?”

“Perhaps,” replied a steely-eyed captain with the look of one who knows the exact path he needs to take to climb over fat-faced idiots for a promotion, “Reagan is a warmonger, hungering for a reason to drop the bomb on the Soviet Union.”

Stanislav looked away from the cackling group of men that sounded more like hens than roosters, but whispers of “Hiroshima” and “Nagasaki” snuck into his ears. Japan was not far enough and World War II not long enough past for the Russians to forget what had happened and to take the lesson to heart. *They had done it before.* What could Stanislav do but protect his homeland?

While on duty, Stanislav was the officer in charge of the *Oko* early warning system. His duty day consisted of watching men watch computer screens to make sure no one sent a missile at Moscow. With the tension over the Korean airliner and a reportedly trigger-happy American president, now seemed as good a time as any for Armageddon. The world, he knew, especially America, also leveled a suspicious eye at the Soviet Union. Evil empire. That’s what they said.

He thought of Raisa and their children, Dmitri and Yelena. Were they evil? Raisa was the kind of warm, endearing, laughing mother his had never been. He thought of his frail father, once a mighty pilot that had helped the Americans and the Brits defeat Hitler. Now he was the ghost of a person who had once existed. He even thought of his mother. She was bitter

and sharp, her beauty wasted in hard toil and a loveless marriage, but *evil*? He could not fathom this. What Stanislav wanted was to not get blown up. He didn't especially want to blow anyone up either. He wanted to put on his uniform in the morning, wear it with pride all day, and then go home. He wanted to eat a bowl of hot soup and laugh at his children's stories. He wanted to smoke a good cigarette and drink a glass of vodka. He wanted to slip into bed with Raisa and whisper and make love and go to sleep.

The ideological war was above Stanislav's pay grade. Let the idiot politicians fight about that. But why must it always be at the expense of the men who wore the uniform? When it came to it, it would be he, not the shitheads in the Kremlin, who had to make the call. It would be he, or his comrades at the *Oko* who had to bear the weight of knowing they had sent a nuclear missile at some poor sucker's family in America, a man that went to some boring job and just wanted to make it home to his wife and kids, but who had been blown into radioactive dust somewhere over Nebraska. *Ne-braz-ka,* it almost sounded Russian. Stanislav bore no ill will against the man somewhere in Nebraska. But what could he do?

Stanislav exited the shuttle bus and entered through the next layer of security before making his way into the recesses of the building to his work site, one of the most secure in the Soviet Union.

"Good evening, Comrade Colonel," said the guard checking identification.

"Ya, good evening, Comrade," Stanislav replied.

He exchanged all the same good evenings he always

exchanged, the only difference being, this was supposed to be his day off. Comrade Oblonsky could not come in today. He was called before the Comrade General at headquarters. Stanislav didn't know why. He found it better not to ask too many questions. Also, he wasn't especially interested in Comrade Oblonsky, who he found to be rather abrasive and loud.

"Status?" Stanislav asked the outgoing officer in charge.

"All systems normal." Of course, they were.

It was just after midnight, halfway through his shift that the alarm sounded. Stanislav tensed up, but one alarm was not a reason to panic. Yet.

"What is the report, comrade?" Stanislav asked his subordinate.

"The satellite shows five intercontinental ballistic missiles from the North American continent have been launched."

Deep in his gut, Stanislav Petrov knew something was not right. But there it was. Alarms were sounding ominously throughout the bunker. The computer screens were flashing red imminent danger warnings. He knew the protocol. He knew what he was supposed to do, and he also knew that he shouldn't do it. But here, in this building he was no longer Stanislav, husband to Raisa, father to Dmitri and Yelena. He was Lieutenant Colonel Fucking Petrov. He had orders, dammit. And he was surrounded by others who would be watching him. Hesitating to follow protocol was no light matter. He knew it could mean prison. Or worse. It could be treason. Worse yet, it could mean millions of his own people would die. Worse yet, it

could mean World War III. But this time, America was not the only country to own a nuclear weapon.

Ha. *A nuclear weapon.* Those words were a joke in 1983. In 1983 one American minuteman nuclear warhead contained more destructive power than all the bomb blasts set off during the entire course of World War II put together.

"Comrade Colonel?"

"I need confirmation."

"Comrade Colonel, headquarters already knows about the attack. They are waiting for your confirmation to respond. They are ready to begin the launch sequence."

Respond in kind. Those were the orders. Every moment he did not obey them was one more step down a path from which he could not return. What would happen to Raisa and the children if he lost his job? Would he have to watch them slowly starve? That was the slow kind of torture he would gladly die in a mushroom cloud to avoid. If he were imprisoned? If he were killed? He pictured the tiny apartment they shared, two small windows letting in only the shadowed light from behind another apartment block. Were he to be sent to prison or killed for this action—or rather *in*action—the children would be taken. Raisa, alone, would have no one to see she took her medicine or to bring her a bowl of soup on a frigid Moscow winter day when no sunlight came through the windows to warm the interior of their home.

The blaring alarms and insistent lieutenant snapped Stanislav's mind back into focus. "Comrade Colonel, what are your orders?" *One wrong decision and everything turns to dust.*

The phone at his right blared insistently. This would be

the call with the answer about the satellite monitoring system. The mathematicians and computer analysts confirmed that their satellite alert system was running properly. There was nothing wrong with it. No reason to believe it was malfunctioning. The ground monitoring analysts could not confirm whether an American Nuclear Minuteman missile was indeed coming for the USSR or not. They could not confirm the second one either. Altogether, the satellite warning system detected five Minutemen. None of them could be confirmed by the ground monitoring system. The ground monitoring system could not say they weren't there either.

"Are they coming?" Stanislav screamed into the phone. On the other end was the major in charge of the ground analysts.

"Conditions are bad, Comrade Colonel. Our view is obscured. We cannot confirm."

"Keep working. Keep looking."

The insistent lieutenant spoke up again, "Comrade Colonel, what do you want to tell headquarters? They insist on a report." He looked into the blinking and frantic eyes of the lieutenant. Stared into them really hard, knowing what he was supposed to do and what he should not do. He stuck his hand out for the phone.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Petrov. False alarm." The lieutenant blinked at him in shock.

The satellite monitoring system was new. Brand new. The algorithms said what they said. That American missiles were right now hurtling through the sky toward a Soviet target and that they would unleash untold destruction. But he didn't

trust the system. Something was wrong. Why five? If this were truly a first strike that would launch the world into war, why not enough to flatten the Soviet Union? That's what he would do. If he wanted to start a nuclear war. He would make sure the enemy was decimated beyond the ability to retaliate. Five missiles would inflict devastating damage, but not enough to wipe them out. Not without getting in a devastating swipe back at America. It didn't make any sense. They would wait.

But the alarms were blaring, and the entire control was looking to him to do what he was supposed to do, yet they were too well trained to disobey his direct orders in case they were the ones later scrutinized.

"Call the ground to air monitoring system again."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant dialed, "here they are, sir."

"This is Petrov. Status?"

"Cannot confirm, sir." *Dammit, dammit, dammit.*

Mushroom clouds exploded in Stanislav's mind. He saw a dead world with burned husks for trees, nothing living but the cockroaches shambling over piles of ash and bodies.

"We wait," he announced. He had no love for the Americans. None. But he could not get past his feeling that this was all some great cosmic mistake. The air in the control room felt too thick to breathe. The smell of sweat permeated every inch of the room as terrified but controlled intelligence officers monitored their screens, sure Stanislav had just condemned them to swift and immediate death.

The phone rang again.

"Headquarters," said the insistent lieutenant, offering the phone to Stanislav.

"Petrov," he paused to listen, "No. It's a false alarm." He handed the phone back to the lieutenant whose eyes told a story of disbelief.

They waited. Stanislav had made the decision, and they all had to live with it. He bet Moscow, all eight million residents, on his gut. If he was right, eight million would be a drop in the bucket compared to the lives saved. Not just human lives, but Life itself.

They waited, and nothing happened. The moment of projected detonation passed, and Moscow was still there. The collective sigh of relief was visible and auditory.

The mathematicians and computer engineers would study the algorithms and try to determine what went wrong with one of the most advanced technological systems on planet earth. There would be hell to pay. But right now, Stanislav was still breathing. He wasn't dust particles in the atmosphere. Neither was Raisa. She was hopefully sleeping peacefully in their bed at home.

Stanislav rode the train home, as he always did. He got on the train at one of the furthest stops so there were often seats available. As the train stopped at each platform the railcar filled up with factory workers, bakers, waiters, nurses, doctors, teachers, and all manner of folks heading home to efficient, if not beautiful, Soviet apartments. The Soviet machine did not stop for the nighttime. An old woman entered the car wearing, as many older women still did, a scarf wrapped around her head in the old way. Stanislav stood to let her sit. He stood among the people in his uniform, reveling in the fact that they were alive, though they themselves did not.

The walk from his stop to his home took fifteen minutes. Warmth attempted to linger in the late September dawn. Stanislav was not a man given to poetry, but if he were, he would have written a poem about the way the soft pink dawn of late September in Moscow lights the normally cold, gray buildings in warmth, rendering them almost beautiful enough to remind one of Heaven, if such a place existed. Which, of course, it did not.

Stanislav opened the door to his apartment cautiously, not knowing if it had been a good night or a bad night. Perhaps Raisa would be sleeping. The children would be.

"Stas? Is that you, my love?" It had been a good night.

"Ya, my little bird. It's me. Who did you expect?"

"KGB," she quipped back. He laughed. *Maybe tomorrow, my love. But not today.*

Their kitchen was the first room on the right upon entering the apartment, so Stanislav stopped there first, pulling a pot of soup out of their small refrigerator. Raisa had actually worked up enough energy to make a large pot on Sunday, with enough left over to make meals for most of the week. He placed the pot on the stove, turned the heat on medium low and left it to warm.

Raisa lay inclined on the sofa, a tattered brown affair that had already been used when they first married. Raisa crocheted bright white, lacy doilies to lay across the arms to hide the dingy fabric, and a multicolored afghan of greens, blues, yellows, and pinks lay over the back. Raisa made everything more beautiful than it would have been left to its own devices. On that old sofa, she had sat reading traditional Russian fairy tales to their

children. On that sofa, they had watched the news of the world pass by on their television. Lunar landings, American failures in Viet Nam, the Munich massacre. There they had hosted friends, drunk too much vodka, smoked too many cigarettes, and postulated about the meaning of it all.

"How was your night, my little bird?" Stanislav asked as he leaned down and kissed his wife on the forehead. She looked tired now, but she was still beautiful.

"It was good. Mrs. Kuznetsova stopped by with cake and tea last night. She complains that her son never calls her. She complains about the price of bread. She complains about the brightness of the sun and the darkness of the night."

Stanislav laughed, "She complains to have something to say. She needs an excuse to talk to someone."

Raisa nodded her head in agreement. "Yes, yes, you are probably right. And anyway, for all her complaining, she makes the loveliest cake, and her tea is strong and sweet. So, I can't complain." They both laughed at her little joke. "How was your day, Stas?"

"Fine." *My day is classified, my little bird.*

"Just fine?"

"Yes. It was the same as always. The computers watched the sky while the men watched the computers while I, I did nothing."

He glanced out the tiny window at the brightening day. He knew they knew. Tomorrow he would face the consequences.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Stanislav's response would be typical? Do you think most people in his role would refuse to launch a nuclear attack, even when protocol and duty demanded it?
2. If you were in Stanislav's position, what would you have done?
3. In the story, the nuclear attack was a false alarm. However, would your opinion of Stanislav's response be different if he had turned out to be wrong and the attack had been real? Is your opinion of his response contingent upon the outcome?
4. Do you think Stanislav should be reprimanded for failing to follow protocol, even though he turned out to be correct?
5. This is based on a true story that took place on September 26, 1983. Does knowing it is a true story change your opinion of the incident or of Stanislav in any way? If so, why?

* * *

People Like Ants

Jacqueline Parker

* * *

Over the dining table, Bea leans closer to my breakfast. Her eyes are magnificent saucers behind her glasses, and I know she hates it—to wear glasses—but her expression of constant bewilderment is painfully endearing. One day, she'll grow up and get the contact lenses she so desperately wants, and she'll no longer tilt into me, her warm child's breath a soft intrusion of love.

"Hey Dad, did you know there are billions of ants in the world?"

Bea's proximity threatens my bacon and toast. She's not focused on it, but I'm a parent and therefore always on high alert, protective of my food. Children are vultures.

"Billions, you say?"

"Mmhmm." She's proud when she can school the schoolteacher.

"Wow," I say. "That sure is a lot. There are probably a

billion right here in Hillsboro alone."

"Really?"

Billions is an intriguing yet impossible concept for an eight-year-old. It's an impossible concept for me, now that I think of it. Used to be that I understood the magnitude of numbers, back when I lived in New York City in a dank, roach-infested high-rise that was the culmination of my young career as a writer. I thought I'd mind coming back to Hillsboro, though it turned out to be just what I needed. Big city it isn't, but it has its charms. That our small town could hold a million, let alone a billion of anything may as well contradict the known laws of physics.

"Oh yeah, kid. How many ants are in an anthill, you think?"

The corner of Bea's rosebud mouth moves like it's pulled by an invisible marionette string.

"A hundred?"

It's infinitely more, closer to hundreds of thousands, but one hundred is an easier number.

"Okay, one hundred ants per anthill. How many anthills do you suppose are in our backyard?"

She runs to the sliding door that separates our dining room from the fenced-in yard. Her hands press against the glass, and I hear her whisper one, two, three… as she counts the sandy piles.

"Twenty!"

"Okay, so one hundred times twenty is two thousand ants. Just in our backyard!"

"Whoa."

Bea's wonderment as she tries to calculate the number of regular old ants in our front yard, then our neighbors' yards, then our town, produces the sobering effect I'm looking for. I can finish my break—

"If there are so many ants, Dad, then does it matter if you step on one?"

If she were older, I'd say no, but she's at an impressionable age where curiosity can become psychopathy with just the right combination of free time and magnifying glasses. Her mother wouldn't have to think about a response—Allison would gently tell Bea that all lives are precious, even tiny ant ones. But Allison isn't here right now, so I do what any dad would do in the absence of a more responsible parent: I lie.

"Sure, it matters, baby. All life is special."

"Jordan Rogers stepped on a lot of ants at recess yesterday. He poured his soda in the anthill and then stepped all over them."

"That wasn't nice at all," I say. "But I'm sure the ant family will be okay. There are a lot of ant brothers and sisters to help out."

Tears start to pool in Bea's eyes. "But won't they miss them?"

This isn't going the way I hoped.

"Oh honey, sure they will, but ants are among the strongest and most resilient insect species on the planet." That last part is true, though I can't speak for their emotional depth. "Did you know that ants can lift over twenty times their body weight?"

"No way!" It seems to cheer her up.

I take a bite of my toast and nod, but before I can snap off a crispy end of bacon, Bea snatches it from my plate and darts upstairs to get ready for school.

* * *

For the better part of the semester, the Language and Science departments have instructed from sweaty mobile trailers after last year's chemistry lab fire, but the eastside wing has finally been rebuilt. The portable classrooms had done little for school spirit, and I've been looking forward to the general teenage chaos of high school. Within its walls, the school still holds opportunity and promise.

My class had finished reading *Our Town* right before the move, but something was bugging me about how perfunctory the process was. Read. Grade. Repeat. There were before me seniors in high school, months before graduating and flitting off like fireflies to colleges and universities across the country. I glance at the clock in my new classroom and sigh.

"Okay guys, let's, uh… why don't we put away the books for today. What do you say?"

"Hell yeah." Candice Percy claps her hardcover text shut and slumps down in her chair.

The rest of the class looks on in careful fascination, the same way Bea had looked numbering the ants.

"I mean it. Let's rap."

A few kids laugh at my attempt at modern vernacular.

"Oh, ha ha, laugh at the old guy," I joke. "I want to talk about time."

"Time?" Sarah Yoder cocks her head to the side in confusion.

I nod. “Yeah. Time is a big element in the play we just read—not enough of it, not using it wisely, the time capsule—and it’s intrinsically linked to memory. Emily, in a sense, grieves twice. Once for her own death and yet again because she’s reliving a moment in her life in which her loved ones aren’t fully appreciating the time they have.”

“Then why are we spending it in school?” Wallace Perkins asks.

“Because otherwise,” I say, “you wouldn’t be exploring the meaning of life through a play written over seventy years ago. You guys are young, not yet inundated with bills and jobs and weird tasks like remembering to buy kitchen sponges and gluten-free crackers.”

Heather Chang’s lips arch, showing a row of even, perfect teeth. “Ew.”

“I know. My wife, not me.” I shrug. “Anyway, the point is that we’ve only got so much time here on earth and Emily recognizes that, but only when it’s too late. She can’t go back to her twelfth birthday any more than she can swoop down to metaphorically shake awake those she left behind from experiencing a lifetime of trivial pursuits.”

“So, when we’re adults we shouldn’t pay bills?” Keith Scott leans back in his desk and grins.

“If it were only that simple. But I think Wilder is saying, through Emily’s observations, that maybe it can be *simpler,* if we learn to appreciate it. Life is wonderful—it doesn’t always have to be complicated—but it is fleeting.”

My students are more focused on putzing around in a future without jobs or grocery lists. I throw my hands up and

smile. “Okay, let’s try something else. Our time is valuable already, but would you do anything differently if you had more of it?”

When I’m met with silence, I choose a volunteer. “Heather, what would you do with an extra hour in the day?”

All eyes turn to the back corner, where Heather is grimacing at her nails.

“Hang out with my boyfriend, Tommy.”

“Okay. Perfect. Spending time with loved ones.” I turn to the chalkboard and write down “Loved Ones” in my neatest handwriting.

Wallace hits the desk and laughs. “Oh, so you *love* him now?”

“You’re just jealous,” Heather sneers.

“Hey now, settle that after class,” I say. “This—” I hold up a copy of the play and give it a little shake for effect, “is the kind of drama that belongs in the classroom. Wallace, you’re up. What would you do with an extra hour?”

“Football practice. We’re gonna win this year!” The hulking seventeen-year-old flexes and barks, riling up his other teammates in class.

“Football. Practicing a hobby, potential career path. Great idea. Anyone else? What about you, Marty?”

“I dunno, maybe… read more?”

“Excellent.”

“Read? Pfsh. Lame,” Keith says.

“I think it’s nice.” Sarah turns to face Marty and smiles.

It’s a cinema-perfect moment where the popular girl shows understanding to the nerdy boy. The bookish, acne-

marred teenager in me melts. “What would you do, Sarah?”

“Go to the mall?”

I scrawl “Shop” on the board. “Anyone else? No? Okay, let’s get down to the heart of it. Extra hour or not, you’re the only person who can make your dreams a reality, so use your time wisely. Class dis—”

The end-of-school bell interrupts, sending the students into a flurry. When I’m alone, I stare at the board. My students’ responses range from learning new languages to sleeping and playing video games. To hope for existential reflection would have been nuts.

* * *

At dinner, I decide to ask Bea what she’d do with the gift of an extra hour.

“Spend more time with you and mommy and the ants.”

My heart.

“That’s very sweet,” Allison says. Her left hand reaches out and rests on the table near Bea, where our daughter is lining up beans in a long coiling snake around her plate. “Do you not want your beans?”

“I’m making an ant family.”

“An ant family?”

“Did you know that there are billions of ants in the world and over two thousand of them live in our backyard?”

“Is that so?”

“And some of them are in our kitchen!”

“Some of them are what? Where?”

“Yeah! I left them some breakfast this morning. Do ants like bacon?”

My eyes widen as Allison blinks at me. I shake my head and mouth an expression of confusion, trying to shirk off responsibility as best I can. It was my bacon, but it was not my hand that fed the insects.

“Dad said we shouldn’t step on ants.”

My wife’s alarm smooths into a razor-sharp line of annoyance directed at me. “Is that so?”

“They’re part of the ecosystem, Mom.”

“Well, I’m sure Dad will find a way to bring them back outside where they belong.” Allison grins and her maybe-not-so-mock tension withdraws. “Without stepping on any one of them.”

* * *

After Bea is upstairs in bed, I help Allison clean the kitchen. She’s hovering over the floor, tracing the ants’ destination from the sliding door through the dining room. I crouch ahead of her with a handheld broom. The ants are pooled around a series of tiny red spots left on the floor like breadcrumbs. Bacon.

“What’s with her sudden interest in ants?”

“She’s curious. Kid stuff,” I say.

I open the door to the backyard and set the dustpan on the grass. The ants will make quick work of the food and eventually return to their home.

We sit in the plastic lawn chairs on our patio and share a cigarette. It’s one of the few remaining vices we have left since becoming parents. Of course, smoking runs in direct opposition to what we teach Bea about health, but old habits die hard.

"And you gave her the 'all life is precious' spiel? I'm impressed."

"I panicked. Figured it was better than her becoming a serial killer."

"Hell of a correlation."

"You never know these days, Ali. One moment she's Dr. Doolittle of the ant world, next she's Dr. Moreau." I take a long drag and pass the cigarette to her. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe you, but I don't think we have to worry about Bea. At least not like that. Maybe turning our house into a zoo…"

The square of grass illuminated from Bea's bedroom window goes dark and suddenly there arises a symphony of crickets and cicadas, noises we didn't notice moments before. It's peaceful. Just Allison, me, and a drifting coil of smoke in the night.

* * *

The ecosystem Bea coaxed into our kitchen grows. There's not a room in our house safe from these tiny black bugs. They eat forgotten food particles that have collected under the cabinets, parade along the windows to our living room, and take showers with us. Bea's in love. And while I'm rather fascinated by how these little creatures can lift colossal crumbs and travel the distance of our dining room to report back to ant headquarters, Allison is decidedly livid.

Under Bea's watchful eye we employ first the homeopathic remedies of cayenne, mint, and cinnamon barricades with varying degrees of success.

"Should I recite an incantation?" I whisper to Allison. "Some ancient curse to deter insects?"

Allison sprinkles the combination of spices across the threshold of the sliding door, Ground Zero of the ant invasion. She snorts a half-laugh but catches herself.

"Oh, come on. It was funny," I say.

"It'll be funny when I'm not picking ants off my dinner plate, Eddie. I swear, my skin is crawling. I feel them everywhere."

"They're harmless, Mom." Bea's belly-down on the kitchen tile with a microscope to the tile.

"I know, sweetie. It's just that ants belong outside where they can be in the sunshine and, you know, eat leaves, do ant things." Allison empties the container of cinnamon with a final shake and looks over her shoulder at our daughter before directing a threatening voice to me. "If this doesn't work, we have to use baits. We have to kill them."

* * *

I bring up the predicament to my class the next morning. Among the solutions my students offer, moving ranks highest, right above setting the house on fire or transforming into an ant a la Kafka's *Metamorphosis.*

"But you see," I say, "my real conundrum isn't removing the ants—although that certainly presents a problem—but it's how to handle this ethical dilemma. Do I kill the ants in secret and lie or admit to my daughter I was wrong, that hundreds of ant lives are indeed not precious?"

"All parents lie, Mr. G.," Wallace says.

"Yeah, and look how you turned out." Heather pops her gum and shrugs. "He's right though. You should lie."

"Is that what you would do?" I ask the class. "Who would

lie and kill the ants in secret?" Hands shoot up. "And what about those in the other camp? Who thinks I should admit my hypocrisy?"

It's a fifty-fifty split.

"Anyone else have a Plan C?"

Marty Hanson raises his hand. "Why don't you get her an ant farm? You'll have to kill them, anyway, so why not let her keep some?"

"That's a great idea, Marty," Sarah says.

Murmured assents ripple through the room. In a surprising display of helpfulness, Wallace offers his old lizard tank. Other students volunteer to collect foliage and create obstacle courses for the insects. I sit against the edge of my desk and survey the class. There's hope for them after all.

* * *

"I thought we were getting rid of the ants," Allison mumbles.

"We will. We will. I'll set baits tonight for the rest of them." I sidle in close and kiss her cheek. "Win-win."

Bea's on her hands and knees in the kitchen coaxing ants onto a sheet of paper and depositing them into the terrarium my students had made for her in class that afternoon. Each ant has a name: Artie, Adam, Amy, even one named Allison. My daughter makes an unlikely Noah, shepherding insects to safety, all the while unknowingly condemning the others to death. A sticky thought of betrayal crawls over my shoulders; I had assigned her the role of playing God to relieve myself of the burden of choice.

But damn if it doesn't make her happy.

* * *

The baits go under the kitchen sink, in a corner behind the couch, any inconspicuous place I can find. I don't feel good about it, but we can't keep up the charade. The spice barriers are useless, so Allison and I have resorted to squashing bugs in secret after Bea goes to bed. It's only a matter of time before they fall victim to the sugary traps; I just hope Bea doesn't find them first.

The truth of the matter—and what I hate to admit to my daughter—is that I was wrong. Ants are important, sure, but our sanity wins over the few hundred insects making our casa, su casa. We have spent hours in our daughter's presence pretending to coddle an invading ant population, and it's exhausting. Ants do matter. Just not the uninvited ones in our home. Am I a bad father for lying to my daughter and subsequently hiding my lie by having my students soften the blow? Perhaps. But Santa Claus still exists for a couple more years, so the scales are tipped in my favor.

This belief, however, is short lived.

Bea's high-pitched shriek rattles the windowpanes the next morning. Downstairs, she crouches by the sofa, looking at a pile of ants who have surrendered to their death. Little black bodies float in the poisonous liquid. The temporary survivors are crawling back outside, where they'll carry the disease back to the colony.

Between sobs, she expresses the depth of her anguish. "You said you wouldn't kill them!"

"Oh, baby girl, I'm sorry." I kneel down beside her, but she pushes me away. "There were just too many."

"I could have saved them!"

A couple dozen more, maybe—the process to obtain the ones she had rescued had taken hours—but she couldn't prevent the death of thousands. I wonder if she'd say the same for head lice.

Allison comes down the stairs. When she sees the scene—the candy-bar-sized ant trap and our crying daughter, she frowns. "Oh, honey."

"Yeah, I know she—"

"Not you." Allison rolls her eyes at me and perches on the edge of the couch.

"Dad killed the ants." Bea swipes her palm across her nose and pouts. The gap between mother and daughter closes, and I'm left watching the two women in my life comfort each other over the Bad Dad.

Allison tucks a piece of Bea's hair behind her ears. "Sweetheart, he was only doing what he thought was right. You see, ants and people can't live together like that."

"Why not?"

Because humans are bigger and ants are pesky, and some animals serve a purpose like food and some animals are inconsequential in their deaths like ants, and not all animal lives are created equal? That even the sanctity of life has its limits?

Instead, my wife says, "Because ants would eat all of our food. They would get in your hair and bite you, and then they might bring their friends along, like wasps and hornets, which are mean and sting you."

This imagined wilderness of nasty insects and bug bites appears to calm Bea down.

"Oh," she whispers.

There's little I can do, so I set myself to making coffee and breakfast while Allison helps Bea conduct an ant funeral, complete with an old shoe box and soft-spoken condolences.

When they finish, the sliding door scrapes to a close, and I feel Allison's hand glide against my back.

"How's she doing?" I pass a mug to her and sigh.

"She'll be fine. I think the idea of angry bees and ants sharing her Oreos helped."

"You always know what to say in these situations. I'm not good with this."

"You think too much, that's all."

"Well, yeah." I face her and stare into the backyard. A small mound of dirt with a popsicle stick poking out of it marks the gravesite. "You even made her an ant memorial."

"I'm a sucker for a good sob story." Allison kisses me on the cheek. "Bea will forgive you."

"I know. I just hate being the jerk."

"But you're our jerk. And we love you."

* * *

The outpouring of sympathy from my students is unexpected. Sarah Yoder's face falls when I retell the morning's saga. Marty and Wallace remain overjoyed that their contributions are intact and appreciated by Bea, while Candice Percy snickers in the background at first but frowns when I mention the popsicle tombstone. It seems my class has a vested interest in my success, and the optimist in me quivers with pride.

"There was no easy way out of this, Mr. G.," says Wallace.

"But you did the right thing."

"Did I? I still lied to my daughter."

"It was to be kind," Sarah says. "It was harmless. The ants would have died anyway."

"But now she knows I'm a liar."

Candice scoffs. "She'd find out sooner or later. No offense."

She's right—there'll be a day when Bea learns that her mother and I told a number of untruths big and small, even if it was all in good faith. We do it to keep her safe, to prolong her happiness, to find ways to make moments stand still. Who can blame me for wanting to spare Bea the knowledge of time and its consequences?

Bea would have spent her extra hour with the ants—elbows in the dirt, chin cradled in her hands, ogling the lives of another species like a curious god. My students, well, they made an eight-year-old child an ant farm when they could have been shopping or playing video games or making it to second base.

I scan the rows of seats with these familiar yet strange, impressionable students before me and smile. One day their extra hours will melt like ice cream in summer, when the idea of spending sixty minutes doing any one thing will be unfathomable. For now, they have a whole world of possibility right in front of them. They have all the time in the world.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What would you do with an extra hour in the day? What can we learn about a person by their answer to this question?
2. The narrator tells his daughter, “All life is special.” Do you agree? If so, how do you justify keeping life (*like ants*) out of your house with various pesticides?
3. The narrator’s students say, “All parents lie,” and it’s not a bad thing. Do you agree? What lies are you okay with the narrator telling his daughter in the story? Which should he have told?
4. In *Our Town* the main character believes people are chasing a lifetime of trivial pursuits, do you agree? What qualifies as a trivial vs. a non-trivial pursuit?
5. How does the reading of *Our Town* tie together into a common theme with the saga of the narrator’s daughter and the ants?

* * *

The Formula

Richard A. Shury

* * *

"Birthday boys!"

The shouts of the young men echoed through the small space, bouncing off hardened plastic and safety glass.

"This is going to be too good, man!"

"When do the girls arrive?"

"Not till tomorrow afternoon. Tonight's all about the lads!"

"We're gonna get you guys fucked up!"

Laughter and noise filled the car. Brent, driving, turned around to talk to the boys in the back seat. "I heard about this bar with cheap shots and loose women."

"You'll be fine, you bronze Adonis," replied Jalil, "but we've gotta get Sam laid. It's his birthday, and he's fucking hopeless."

"I do all right," Sam sulked, underneath the boos of his companions. In the passenger seat, Ali looked at Brent, waving

his hands.

“I told you to watch the fucking road. I don’t want to die before we get Sam so drunk he pukes.”

“Shit, we’ve done that before,” Jalil called.

The car swerved a little. Around them, the motorway rushed past, wobbling and then straightening out. Up ahead, the outline of a bridge heaved into view, large spokes stabbing down from a wheel in the sky to impale the concrete monolith at various points.

“Fuck’s sakes.” Ali reached over and slapped a button next to the steering wheel.

“Hey!” Brent said, as the steering wheel and pedals withdrew.

“Automated driver activated,” the car said in a soothing, feminine voice. “To change the destination, please use the control board. Enjoy your journey.”

“That’s better,” Ali said, kicking the lever near the foot of his chair. There was a click, and the chair spun around; he faced Jalil and Sam. “Oh wait, what a terrible view.”

Sam pulled the finger.

“Why do you even bother driving?” Jalil asked, as Brent spun his chair to join them.

“I like it. Aren’t you going to take the test?”

“What’s the point? They’re going to ban the manual option soon, anyway.”

“You never know, it might not go through. Anyway, driving is cool man. It’s fun. Like, kinda zen. I like the drive down to Swanage to my parents’ place. It’s really nice.”

A beer can cracked open. “But you can’t do this when

you're driving!" Ali handed the can to Brent, cracked a few more. The boys yelled cheers and tipped their heads back.

"Yes man, this is excellent. Especially now Brent can buy us beers."

"The only thing this car needs is a pisser," Sam said.

"Piss in the can. Now that Brent's not driving, it'll be a smooth ride."

"You sure we'll be able to get in the clubs?" Ali asked. "Brent's the only one who's eighteen."

"I will be on Sunday," Sam said, sniffing the bright blue can in his hand. He took a sip.

"Sunday's too fucking late."

"We've got the IDs, so quit worrying."

"But they won't stand up to more than the local scan."

"These hick bars aren't going to have the full connection. The national database isn't even running properly yet," Brent replied.

Ali tipped the remains of his can into his mouth, crushed it in his hand, dropped it, and belched.

"How do you know?"

"Don't you watch any news?"

"Nah, fuck that. Too depressing."

"Well anyway, it'll be fine. This is going be a good…"

Brent trailed off as he saw the look on Sam and Jalil's faces change. Their eyes went wide, and they threw their arms up in front of their faces. Ali started to turn and look; his yell was still half-formed in his throat when the semi crashed through the front of the car.

"Collision warn—" the car began, then stopped abruptly.

The vehicle collapsed, its glass splintering into bright beads, its metal struts compressing, folding in such a way as to provide maximum protection for the occupants. The car buckled against the side of the larger vehicle for a moment, and then was thrown clear, crashing over the side of the bridge and hanging in mid-air, a cartoon forgetting about gravity. Then it was in the river and bobbing, a crumpled mess. The displaced water reclaimed its place, crawling through the openings in what remained of the vehicle.

* * *

From its base several kilometers away, the emergency drone was dispatched with an efficiency which easily outstripped anything human hands could have produced. The car's alert system had broadcast an all-channel mayday microsecond after the impact detectors had sensed the erratic path of the semi. The signal was shunted to the top of the local network by virtue of its status, and the base AI began the sequence of commands which woke the drone from its sleep and propelled it to the launch platform.

Seconds later, the drone was powered up and undergoing pre-flight checks. All equipment bays were fully loaded, battery packs were charged, and all systems registered green. The drone signaled readiness and received departure permission.

All this happened as it was removed from its charging bay by mechanical hands and placed onto a large elevator, which pushed it to the top of a facility, housing several others like it. It swung into the air and, once clear of the facility, spun turbines up for maximum speed. It reached the accident site

two minutes nine seconds after activation, all the while processing and parsing data being provided to it by the AI in the vehicles on scene and embedded in the bridge sensors.

The drone came to a halt directly over the point where the car hit the water, and hatches on either side of its undercarriage opened, spilling several dozen hand-sized machines out into the river. The spider-like devices entered the water and immediately sent out echolocation pulses. By virtue of its size and composition, the vehicle was quickly found several meters down, and the machines activated their propellers, swarming over and into the car and probing it for information.

Meanwhile, the drone had accessed a weak signal from the car's AI, which was devoting the remainder of its resources to the emergency medical procedures it was able to enact. It had placed oxygen bubbles over the faces of the boys, and the few undamaged medical machines it possessed were focused on preventing blood loss. It informed the drone that one of the occupants had been killed on impact and sent the details of the medical status of the three remaining humans, as well as their biographical information, medical histories, and its own remaining capabilities and power reserves.

The car was active for fourteen more seconds before its power failed and it went dark. In that time, the drone assessed the information stream from the car and from its spiders, and instructed them on how to proceed, including its assessment of prioritization.

In the darkness underneath the water, the spiders went to work. The boys were dimly aware of the machines

approaching them, climbing over them, administering drugs and clamping wounds. One boy was panicking, waving slow swings at the things he could feel but not see, but his arms were caught and pinned gently to his sides. Seconds later, he passed out.

The drone spun a cable down into the water; this was attached to the vehicle which, once the spiders reported stability, was pulled from the river and deposited on the bridge, gently, like a mother lion with her cubs in her mouth.

A flying ambulance arrived on scene and began communication with the other machines on site. The drone had been established as the lead intelligence, but now relinquished that role to the ambulance as protocol required.

The drone sent control permission to the ambulance, allowing it to use any of the spiders it needed, and lowered itself to the bridge to recover those that were not required. The ambulance dispatched its own spiders to cut through the car, while opposite, hundreds more of the small machines clambered over the semi. The occupants of both vehicles, a mess of flesh and blood, were lifted from the wreckage and placed aboard the ambulance, which lifted easily into the air and sped away to the nearest hospital. Simultaneously, a signal was sent to their designated guardians and relatives, informing them of the incident and providing instructions for the fastest routes to the hospital.

* * *

Bill and Alice Carruthers stood before the hospital bed clutching hands; before them lay their son, Sam. He was cocooned in an organized mess of plastic and tubes. Dermal

coverings, monitoring tags, and other devices whose purpose was unclear swirled around him, over him, into him. A quiet cacophony of beeps and hums filled the air, lending a further sense of movement to the twists and turns of the smooth plastics which covered the boy.

"Mr. and Mrs. Carruthers."

The pair looked up, shaken from their trance. They decoupled and turned to face the woman who'd entered the room.

"Doctor…"

"I'm Doctor Gireau, and I'm in charge of Sam's care. He's been very lucky."

"Lucky?" Bill looked at his son and back to the doctor.

"It's really a lot better than it looks, and it could have been worse. The emergency vehicles were able to get to him very quickly. He's stable, no major internal injuries, and no loss of any limbs. We're going to keep him under for a few days to give his body a chance to heal. It's better than using the medical dots; we like to stick to non-invasive intervention wherever possible."

"So he'll be ok?"

"Yes, the prognosis is a full recovery. He may need some therapeutic work, both physical and mental, but in general he's been fortunate."

The couple took hold once more, each leaning on and supporting the other, holding tight in an expression of shared relief. Alice looked at her son and then back to the doctor. A thought flashed through her mind.

"But… he…" Alice started speaking, stopped, collected

herself. “We heard what happened. It doesn’t bear thinking about. How did he… I mean, the other boys…”

The doctor sighed slightly, shifted her weight. “It’s a tough thing. One of the boys was killed instantly. The others, including your son, were saved by the vehicle’s automated measures. It was able to alert an emergency drone within seconds, and it was also able to keep them alive until the drone arrived and could dispatch medical support.”

“But Brent…” Alice went on, then stopped, unsure how to word her thoughts.

“Brent was a victim of his age, unfortunately.”

“How do you mean?” Bill asked.

The doctor looked surprised. “His age, sir. He’d turned eighteen recently. The medical machines are programmed to prioritize minors over adults. They triage on that basis. It’s not a pleasant formula to have to program, but public opinion is generally in favor of it.”

Alice and Bill were stunned. Gireau allowed them a moment to take things in. Finally, Bill spoke.

“You mean, if this had occurred a few days later, after Sam’s birthday, he could have been…” He broke off, unable to complete the thought.

“There’s no way to tell what might have happened,” Gireau said, softly. “If I were you, I’d focus on the positives. Your son is alive and is doing well.”

The couple nodded, and the doctor continued. “You have my contact card; follow the thread for medical updates and feel free to send any questions there. Or if you’d like to talk more, use the link, and I’ll receive a notification. I’ll be in touch as soon

as I can."

"Yes. Thank you, Doctor," they called as she walked from the room.

They stood there some more, looking at their boy, losing track of the time. The sounds of the room swam around them.

"Shall we go and get a cup of tea?" Bill said at last. Alice nodded, and Bill led her from the room. In the corridor they stopped.

"Is that…" Alice asked, but didn't need to finish the question. Further down the corridor, Brent's parents sat, arms around each other, sobbing.

Bill and Alice looked at each other, nodded, and made their way toward the couple.

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—November 2020 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. The doctor says, “The medical machines are programmed to prioritize minors over adults.” Do you agree with medical machines setting treatment priorities? If so, is prioritizing the safety of a minor over an adult appropriate? What about prioritizing younger adult patients over older ones?
2. Should AI in self-driving cars, or any other form, be programmed with human safety “prioritization” at all? Should individual fault be considered in the prioritization equation? (*For example, a person walks in front of a car putting the occupants at risk if the car veers too quickly.)*
3. If AI has priorities set for it, who should set those priorities? (*Government, the manufacturer, insurance companies, ethicists, the general public?*) What do you think a fair public/private process for setting AI priorities looks like?
4. Should the owner of a self-driving AI car be allowed to change the priority default settings?
5. Should a human supervising the medical emergency response be allowed to override the priority default settings? Should the person who changed the settings be exposed to liability for having done so? What about the owner in Question 4?

* * *

Externalities

Geoffrey Hart

* * *

"*In economics, an externality is the cost or benefit that affects a party who did not choose to incur that cost or benefit.*"—James Buchanan and W. Craig Stubblebine

* * *

The library rolled heavily into town, bearing its cargo of knowledge mundane, esoteric, and somewhere in between. Its ancient axles creaked as it slowed, executed a graceful turn through the caravanserai, and came to rest, facing the town square and the well that travelers used. The horses, dust coating their sweaty flanks, snorted in anticipation. Willem waited for his apprentice, Thomen, to descend, then leaned heavily on the youth's shoulder as he eased himself to the ground, wincing at the pain in his hips. Once both feet were firmly on the ground, he stretched mightily, his joints emitting an alarming series of crackling noises.

"Ahhh... that's better. Fetch me some water. I'm feeling

drier than Epicurus, and half as lively." He kicked at the dust to emphasize his point.

The youth grabbed the tin bucket that hung from the wagon's bench seat, behind the buckboard, and ran to the well. By the time he'd returned, Willem had unfurled their banner, which lay limp in the motionless air. While Thomen had been away, a discreet crowd had gathered, curious to learn what the wagon had brought them. The sage took a long drink from the bucket, then poured the remainder over his head. "Thanks." He ruffled the youth's hair, then gestured at the banner with a cocked thumb. Thomen seized the dangling end, nimbly swarmed up the back of the wagon, and tied the banner's end to the cord they'd attached there for this purpose. In letters two feet tall, it read: "Library." Below, in lettering you had to approach to read, it said "Master Sage Willem, Oikonomist. Knowledge revealed, affordable rates."

Without being asked, Thomen unhitched the horses and re-hitched them to one of the many posts made available for this purpose. Then he made several back-and-forth journeys with the bucket to fill the trough. While the horses drank, he hopped into the wagon like the monkey he'd been repeatedly told he resembled, but had seen only in pictures, and returned bearing blankets to wipe the sweat from their broad backs. He also bore an assortment of brushes and combs to curry the dust of the road from their sleek hides. By the time he'd finished and gone in search of hay, Willem had unstrapped his folding chair and card table from the stowage beneath the wagon and was sitting in the shade, awaiting their first customer.

That customer was not long in coming. As he pushed

through the small crowd, he was preceded by a smell that parted the bystanders and made the horses seem perfumed by comparison. Willem mastered himself with the ease of long practice, only a welcoming grin showing on his face. The peasant unceremoniously piled a heap of greasy coppers on the card table, paused a moment, then knuckled his forehead. “My daughter’s gums bleed, her teeth are loose as molting feathers, and she heals slowly.”

Willem pushed the man’s coins back across the table. “Seek the fruit with an orange rind that folk call sunsweet. Or the fruit with a yellow rind and intense sourness, known as sweet-tart, or its green-rinded cousin bitter-rind, the one with the intense bitterness. Feed her one a day until the bleeding stops, then weekly thereafter.”

The peasant spat upon the ground. “I can’t afford such luxuries.”

“Then seek rose hips and crush them to make a tea. You can dry them, and they’ll keep over the winter. If none grow near you, brew a tea from the leaves of either of two evergreen trees that grow in these woods. In wet areas, you’ll find the first of them, named whitestripe, with thin leaves that lay flat, emerging individually from the branches. The sprays of leaves are broad—about twice the width of your thumb—and the leaflets are no longer than the first joint of your thumb. They’re glossy green above; below, they’re a paler green, with white stripes that run along the branchlet on the bottom. Those are the stripes that give the tree its name. The second tree grows on sandy, rocky soil, yet reaches to the sky. It’s named duster, for the leaves are soft, needle-like, and long as your fingers. They

emerge in dense sprays of five, bound together like the hairs in a dust brush—hence its name." Thomen had returned, a bale of hay in his arms, and had been watching the interaction quietly.

"Thomen? Fetch Farrar's book of trees." He waited patiently for his apprentice to return, bearing a thick book. Willem flipped through the pages, stopping about a quarter of the way through. He turned the book toward the peasant. "They look like this."

When the peasant had reclaimed his coins, he bowed and backed away, knuckling his forehead as he retreated. Thomen looked imploringly at his teacher, then spoke quietly so the onlookers wouldn't hear. "Master, might we afford a sunsweet or one of the others? It's been months." The youth licked his lips.

Willem patted his apprentice's curly hair. "If we have enough money left after buying necessaries, perhaps we can splurge on a few treats."

"We'd have more money if you didn't give away our services."

Willem snorted. "One thing you must learn, apprentice, is when to demand an arm or a leg, and when it's wiser to share our knowledge freely. There are consequences for any price, and they have to do with oikonomika." He paused a moment, lost in thought. "Yes, perhaps it's past time you began that study. Fetch the big leather book on the top shelf, the one with *Oikonomika* in gold leaf on the spine."

Thomen climbed more grudgingly into the wagon this time. There came rustling sounds as he moved about the narrow aisle between the books. By the time he'd returned,

clutching his prize, a small but exceptionally brawny man wearing a leather apron was chatting with his master. “So that, in sum, is the problem: my steel is too brittle. Which is undesirable from the perspective of repeat business, aye, but it’s worse than that. I sell the steel to knights and men at arms and others who have a nasty disposition and are far too quick to use even that brittle steel to solve their problems—of which I’m now one. That being the case, its brittleness consoles me not, as even bad steel’s strong enough to open me from nave to chops.”

Willem met the smith’s gaze. “How much charbon are you using in the steel?”

“Charbon?”

“The materials like charcoal that you add to strengthen the steel.”

“Ah. About 2 per hundredweight.”

“Far too much. That will certainly make the steel brittle. Cut that amount in half, then in half again. Perhaps more, depending on what else is in the steel.”

“You’re sure?”

“In steel, as in life, moderation is best.”

The smith placed a silver coin on the table, bowed somewhat dubiously, and walked away.

Thomen looked up from his book. “Master? How did you know that obscure fact?”

“It’s not nearly so obscure as you’d think. Smiths aren’t the only ones who make the mistake of assuming that if some is good, more is better. It rarely is. Moderation in everything, including moderation is my motto. You’ve found the book?

Good. Keep reading and don't interrupt a customer with your questions."

Their next customers were a pair of minstrels, one fair-skinned as the day was bright, the other dark-skinned as the night sky. Willem and Thomen appraised them, then exchanged glances. The two men doffed their plumed hats to the sage and the apprentice, making a leg so deeply before they straightened that the feathers trailed in the dirt. The pale one wished them a good day, then, proprieties satisfied, placed a silver coin upon the table, joined by its twin from the dark one, who had paused to dust off his plume.

"We seek a decision. We have different memories of the famous quote on fornication from *The Tragedy of the Rich Ievv of Malta*."

Willem's brows knitted a moment, and he looked to the sky. Then he smiled, and quoted from memory: "But that was in another country, and besides, the wench is dead."

The pale one smiled at his companion, somewhat lasciviously, Thomen thought. But the dark one frowned and spoke in a voice with hints of a Moorish accent. "Are you certain?"

Willem sighed and turned to Thomen. "Fetch me the tome labeled *Great Plays*." He waited patiently until the youth returned, thumbed through the book, then placed the book open to the right page upon the table. Willem rotated the book toward the minstrels. "Here you go: see for yourself."

The dark minstrel blushed. "Nay, I need not. Your word suffices."

Willem made the coins disappear. "Then I wish you both

a good day."

"A very good day and mayhap a better night." The pale minstrel kissed the dark one on the cheek as they moved off; the latter recoiled and pushed his companion to arm's length.

The sage snorted. "Some free advice, my apprentice: whenever you're certain you know the answer, doubt that certainty. Most bets, and all provisions of knowledge, have consequences." No other customer waited, though a few children hovered in hope of entertainment. Willem assumed a mentorish mien and cleared his throat. His apprentice looked up from where he'd been paging reluctantly through *Oikonomika*. "Have you learned yet the origin of the book's title?"

"Aye. It comes from the great Aristotle. Oikonomika is Greek and denotes the laws that govern the management of one's household."

"Good. And how does it relate to the word *oikologia*?"

Thomen's mouth gaped a moment. "Both begin with the prefix oiko?"

Willem aimed a mock blow at his apprentice. "Aye, they do, but that's far too glib a response to let stand. Seek and find me the real reason." Thomen climbed reluctantly back into the wagon, which squeaked as he moved about and shifted his weight above the springs. By the time the youth emerged, clutching a well-worn tome with *Lexiko* faintly visible on its spine, their next customer had arrived. He was a tall, thin man, dressed richly and accompanied by two large and thuggish-seeming men, one armed with a longsword belted at his waist, the other leaning on a staff taller than himself and thicker than

Thomen's wrist.

"I bid you a good afternoon, wise sage. I have a question of a financial nature for you."

Willem raised an eyebrow, and the man placed a silver coin on the table. Willem's eyebrow remained raised. For a long moment, there was silence. Then the thin man sighed and replaced the silver with gold. The sage's eyebrow relaxed. "How may I be of service?"

"A caravan master has asked me for a loan to fund an expedition to the Far East. There's silk, of course, and exotic spices. But he also claims to have visited an arid land, everywhere covered with sand but for where salt lies upon the ground as far as the eye can see—free for any man to take, which strains credibility. He spoke of strange animals with cloven feet and hunched backs that carry the natives across shifting sands that would kill a horse, and of winds strong enough to carve stones—indeed, strong enough to strip a man's flesh from his bones if he should be forced to stay unprotected in the open. His details make a compelling story, but we both know not to trust a skilled storyteller. Nonetheless, if true, there's much profit to be had. But no profit comes without a price, and with that much wealth waiting to be exploited, someone must surely have taken measures to protect it for their own benefit. So, the risk of such a venture would seem high."

"Indeed. Yet his safe return from a previous voyage to those lands bodes well for his prospects."

"If he's telling the truth and not simply a thief repeating an overheard tavern tale and hoping to make off with my money."

"This will take some research. Please return tomorrow morning and I shall have your answer." The merchant bowed and left.

"Master?"

"Yes, apprentice?"

"It sounds a fanciful tale."

"And yet, like most fancies, it undoubtedly has some truth at its core. I have memories of such a tale. But he will want confirmation." Willem named a dozen books, and Thomen went to fetch them.

Some time later, as the sun began to set, their last customer of the day arrived. From his garb and the gold that gleamed in his ears and on his fingers, a prosperous merchant, and he'd waited for the bystanders to disperse before approaching. He walked with the assurance of one with too much money and the firm belief that this somehow made him important. The bodyguard who accompanied him, though considerably smaller than the two who'd guarded the banker, had a quiet confidence about him and a lithe swagger that suggested he was far more dangerous. When they reached the library, the merchant looked the sage up and down, and taking in the worn and travel-stained clothing, he snorted and frowned down the length of his long nose. "My daughter loves a guardsman." He spoke that last word as if it tasted of ashes in his mouth and spat messily upon the ground, some of the spittle running down his chin. He wiped his chin on his sleeve, then placed a silver coin upon the table.

Willem returned a smile for the frown. "Please give her my congratulations. True love, they say, is hard to find."

"You mistake me, sirrah. I seek a grandson to whom I can pass my business when I grow too feeble to manage it myself." He placed a second silver coin upon the table.

"Guardsmen tend to be robust and lusty specimens. I doubt you'll be disappointed. A guardsman's son will do as well as a prince's if he has native wit and you train him in the ways of your business. Consider this unpromising specimen, for instance." He swatted the wagon, the thump surprising Thomen and making him jump. "If your daughter bears you no son, nor daughter neither, for that matter—well, then, there are many orphans. Perhaps you can adopt one who shows a particularly keen mind."

"For a sage, you are uncommonly slow-witted." A third coin joined the first two. "Is it not said that any answer a man could desire can be found in your books?"

Willem frowned, mirroring the merchant, and pushed back the coins, ignoring the gasp from his apprentice. "Like many of the educated, you have heard wisdom you do not understand. There is abundant truth in the library, enough to answer most questions. Though one can invent truth to suit one's needs of the moment, that does not mean one should do so. For a merchant, you show an uncommon lack of understanding value. Take my advice for free if you do not value it." He pushed the coins back across the table. "Love your daughter and accept freely what she can give you."

The merchant spat again and turned on his heel, spurning the dirt so that some flew back upon Willem's worn leather boots. Without further word, he stomped off down the street. His bodyguard paused a moment, rolled his eyes, then

followed.

"Master? With those coins we could have bought many sunsweets. Perhaps even some bittersweets."

Willem sighed. "Thomen, have you not yet learned the great lesson of our profession?"

"Which lesson is that, Master? There have been so many."

"That if we are to honor our profession, we must give our customers what they need. Not what they want."

"But Master... do we not give them what they need by giving them what they want?"

Willem sighed. "Have you found the shared meanings of oikonomika and oikologia? No? Ask me the same question once you've done so."

Some time later, Thomen looked up from *Lexiko*. Willem had already begun the preparations for their dinner.

"Master? Both words relate to management of the house. But one is more about monetary matters, and the other about the living world that surrounds and includes the house."

"Precisely. And one can no more manage the house solely by the one discipline than one can manage it solely by the other, since the one exists within the other. And the answer to your question?"

"That needs are needs, that they are objective rather than subjective, and that they are not always the same as wants."

"Bravo! And what lesson can we take from this knowledge?"

Thomen remained silent. When the silence had stretched long enough, Willem sighed and answered his own question. "That knowledge and fact are invariant, but that truth

is often contextual—and every truth has consequences in a given context. Our real business is the sale of necessary truths, not knowledge alone. Any fool who can read can find knowledge, given enough time randomly paging through our library. It takes a special kind of fool to see how to use that knowledge without suffering its consequences."

Willem laughed and ruffled his apprentice's hair. "There's hope for you yet!"

As the night was clear and starry and still warm from the summer's day, they ate outside and watched the sky, Willem drilling his apprentice on the names of the constellations. When both were yawning and groping for names, they curled up and slept outside the wagon on piled blankets.

In the morning, the banker returned. Willem had retained nearly a dozen of the books he'd consulted, which lay open upon his table. He had half-known the answer to the man's question before he began, but had learned that customers showed a willingness to pay that was proportional to the apparent effort devoted to finding a solution—more willing, certainly, than to pay for the correct answer gained too easily. Jewelers, silversmiths, and the prosperous—including the banker—paid well for accurate and relevant knowledge, but left satisfied with their price in large part because of the time spent in search of the solution.

"I have your answer: you should invest your money in the man's expedition, but ensure that he goes well-guarded into those distant lands. There are many who would take their toll, or even the whole profit. Also warn him to travel toward the end of the summer, when salt is most abundant, and to see that

he always carries more water than he thinks he'll need. Enough for weeks, not days. And one last bit of advice I offer freely: send one of your men with him, his allegiance concealed, to watch over your interests."

The banker licked his lips. "And your proof?"

"Here." The sage opened the first book. "This map shows the arid lands of which he spoke." He opened a second book. "This traveler's tale speaks of the abundant salt deposits to be found in these lands." Then a third. "And here is a drawing of the *kamuhls* the natives use to cross the sands." More books were opened, more details provided. By the end, the banker's head was nodding at each new fact, and he was so pleased, he threw several silver coins to join the gold on the table as he left.

As the sun continued its relentless rise, the merchant returned, accompanied by a young woman and a member of the town watch—a willowy, dark-skinned woman with a broad nose and tightly curled hair. The young woman's long nose made it clear she was the merchant's daughter. The sage looked warily at the guardsman, who maintained an impassive expression and carefully failed to meet his gaze. The merchant touched a forefinger to the tip of his nose, winked at the sage, and deposited a gold coin upon the table. "Please tell my daughter, sir, what you told me yesterday."

The daughter turned defiant eyes upon the sage, who calmly made the coin disappear. "I told your father that true love is rare and to be cherished. If you love someone, may your love be a blessing to you and your family both."

The daughter had been prepared for a fight and was flustered. But after a moment, she relaxed and offered a shy

smile. But the watchwoman smiled broadly, laughed, and clapped a hand possessively on the daughter's shoulder. The sage blinked, then mastered himself.

The merchant sputtered, then reached to his belt and withdrew an ornate dagger better suited to opening letters than throats. "Sirrah, that is not the wisdom I paid you for. Return my coin, or I shall give you different metal in payment."

The guardsman cleared her throat, and when the merchant turned, placed a large and callused hand on the hilt of her sword. "It is the judgment of the Watch that you have received fair value for your money. Now put away your weapon, or there will be consequences." She exchanged glances with the bodyguard, whose hand had gone to his sword hilt. Their eyes locked a moment, then the bodyguard slowly and carefully removed his hand from the hilt.

The merchant paled, but put away his dagger, and the watchwoman took the daughter's hand and walked away with her, pausing only long enough for the couple to cast radiant smiles at the sage. The merchant, face red and swollen, glared a moment at the sage, then stomped away. After a distinct pause, his bodyguard followed.

"Do you know what we call those smiles, my apprentice?"

Thomen blushed. "Sir, I do not."

"In oikonomika, there is the priced value of a transaction. That is the gold coin the merchant gave us so he could learn a hard lesson. But the more important point is often the consequences, expected or otherwise, that accompany the transaction. That is what we call an externality. Some are good, some are bad, and some are neither. But every last one must be

considered before we can know the true value of knowledge and what constitutes the truth of a situation."

Willem rooted in his pouch, then handed his apprentice a handful of coins and a long list of supplies. "Go buy what's necessary, and with what remains, buy yourself a sunsweet... and me, some bittersweet, if there's any to be had. If there's an externality to such treats, I intend to internalize it as soon as can be managed."

* * *

Author's Notes

Bleeding gums are often a sign of scurvy, which can be treated with vitamin C. Though we think of oranges, lemons, and limes (the origin of the name "Limey" for British sailors) as a primary source of this vitamin, many wild herbs, including rose hips, have just as much of this essential vitamin. Trees too. "Whitestripe" is one; we call it balsam fir (Abies balsamea). "Duster" is another; we call it white pine (Pinus strobus). I've included a tip of the hat to John Laird Farrar, my university tree physiology professor, who updated an older classic work on the trees of Canada, though this story is set in early-Renaissance sort-of Europe. Marlowe's The Tragedy of the Rich Ievv of Malta is better known as The Jew of Malta. Externalities are usually considered to be negative, since economists often find themselves working for clients who only value profit and try to pass the costly externalities to someone else to deal with. But some are positive, and I wrote this story, in part, to remind myself of that fact.

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—November 2020 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. Willem tells his apprentice, Thomen, "That knowledge and fact are invariant, but that truth is often contextual…" What does that phrase mean? Do you agree with it?
2. The story of the merchant and his daughter is about externalities, *the cost or benefit put on another based on an individual's actions.* What was the externality in the exchange between Willem and the merchant? Was it a positive or negative one?
3. Regarding the blacksmith, Willem says, "Moderation in everything, including moderation." This sounds fine, but how do you *know* if you are doing something in moderation? How do you know how much TV watching, or internet use, is a "moderate" amount?
4. Regarding the two men in the bet, Willem says, "Whenever you're certain you know the answer, doubt that certainty." Does that mean you can never be certain of anything? Is that a clever phrase or an actual truth, in your opinion? Why or why not?
5. Thomen asks, "…do we not give them what they need by giving them what they want?" Is that true? Is what a customer wants always the thing they need and should be given? Can you think of an example where that is not the case?

* * *

Author Information

Pulling Up Azaleas

Bethany Bruno is a Southern writer. She was born and raised in South Florida. She obtained a BA in English from Flagler College and later earned an MA from the University of North Florida. Her writing has been previously featured in several journals, including *The MacGuffin*, *Ruminate*, *BULL*, and *Lunch Ticket Magazine*. Together with her husband and daughter, she currently resides in Alabama.
www.bethanybruno.journoportfolio.com

One Hour

Todd Sullivan currently lives in Seoul, South Korea, where he teaches English as a Second Language. He has had more than two dozen short stories, poems, essays, and novelettes published across five countries. He currently has two book series through indie publishers in America. He founded the online magazine, *Samjoko*, in 2021, and hosts a YouTube Channel that interviews writers across the publishing spectrum. *www.youtube.com/channel/UCcSYSQpTpiyJknWjg2AkC8A*

The Chair of Opportunity

Cory Swanson lives with his wife, two daughters, and the ghost of an old, blind dog named Kirby in Northern Colorado. He teaches music by day and writes by early morning, playing guitar in the evening. At night, he doesn't fight crime. Rather, he sleeps like most people. *Facebook @speculativemeculative; Instagram @coryswansonauthor; Twitter @author_cory*

The Worst Thing You Can Do is Nothing

C.S. Griffel holds an MFA in creative writing and an MA in Rhetoric. She currently teaches creative writing and composition at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *The Talon Review* and *Great! Storybook*. She is currently interested in writing neo-gothic and speculative fiction.

People Like Ants

Jacqueline Parker lives in Charlotte, NC with her boyfriend, dog, and a lot of plants. Her fiction often explores loss in its many forms, but occasionally she writes something funny. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Prime Number Magazine*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Minerva Rising*, and elsewhere. *www.linktr.ee/onmytangent; Twitter & Instagram @onmytangent*

The Formula

Richard Shury studied literature at Otago University, and is a sci-fi nerd. Successes include his piece Chiaroscuro read at Liars' League, while the short stories Ricky's Journey and Gamer have both been published in anthologies. He hopes these are the calm before a storm. Call him a part-time optimist. *@RichardShury*

Externalities

Geoff Hart (he/him) works primarily as a scientific editor, specializing in clients who have English as a second language. When time permits, he also commits fictions. "Externalities" is his 22nd fiction sale. *www.geoff-hart.com*

Additional Information

Reviews

If you enjoyed reading these stories, please consider doing an online review. It's only a few seconds of your time, but it is very important in continuing the series. Good reviews mean higher rankings. Higher rankings mean more sales and a greater ability to release stories.

Print Anthology Series

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com

Purchase our growing collection of print anthologies. They are collections of our best short stories published in the After Dinner Conversation series, complete with discussion questions.

Podcast Discussions/Audiobooks

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com/podcastlinks

Listen to our podcast discussions and audiobooks of After Dinner Conversation short stories on Apple, Spotify, or wherever podcasts are played. Or, if you prefer, watch the podcasts on our YouTube channel or download the .mp3 file directly from our website.

Patreon

https://www.patreon.com/afterdinnerconversation

Get early access to short stories and ad-free podcasts. New supporters also get a free digital copy of the anthology *After Dinner Conversation–Season One*. Support us on Patreon!

Book Clubs/Classrooms

https://www.afterdinnerconversation.com/book-club-downloads

After Dinner Conversation supports book clubs! Receive free short stories for your book club to read and discuss!

Social

Connect with us on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

[This Page Left Intentionally Blank]